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APPLYING THE BACKWARD DESIGN MODEL IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN ECUADOR

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Summary

The global importance of English as a lingua franca has made the English language syllabus an integral part of all levels of education. This study aimed to explore how the Backward Design Model (BDM) application contributed to the syllabus planning and teaching-learning process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Ecuador. This research followed a three-phase design; the first phase focused on gathering information about EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the teaching-learning process in Ecuador and how teachers plan their English language courses. The second phase concentrated on training teachers to apply the BDM for developing their syllabus and unit plans to teach English during one semester. The third phase aimed to gain in-depth insights into the teachers' and students' perceptions of applying the BDM and its main features in their English lessons.

The participants comprised 16 Ecuadorian EFL secondary school teachers and 283 Ecuadorian EFL students. A convergent mixed method design was applied to obtain data from the participants by drawing inferences using qualitative and quantitative methods to triangulate information to enhance the findings' accuracy. The research instruments for getting data were teachers' interviews, students' pre-questionnaire, teachers' unit plans, teachers' reflections, focus-group interviews with teachers and students, and students' post-questionnaire.

The content and thematic analysis of the transcripts from audio-recorded interviews and the other instruments revealed that all the teachers followed the traditional or Forward Model Design when planning the syllabus. As reported by teachers, designing the unit plans based on the BDM principles was a complex but productive process since it let them ensure that the content to be taught would remain focused and organized. They also mentioned that

planning backwards is a more authentic and meaningful process that allows them to plan flexibly according to their students' realities and necessities.

Besides, they perceived that the performance tasks based on the Backward Design Model and the GRASPS framework allowed their students to make the final projects more structured, organized, and contextualized than traditional ones. All teachers mentioned creativity, autonomous learning, and lifelong learning as the skills students showed when performing tasks based on the BDM. Furthermore, the teachers and students perceived that applying the BDM helped enhance listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills; nonetheless, they manifested that writing and reading skills were the most developed.

The teachers stated that following the unit template based on the BDM principles and the WHERETO framework permitted them to align the teaching activities, strategies, and materials with the final performance tasks, which was the most remarkable difference between the BDM and FDM. However, all teachers agreed that planning using the BDM could not be applied in Ecuador because the Ministry of Education already provided them with a template to plan their syllabus, which is mandatory in public institutions. The most outstanding findings from this study suggested that applying the BDM had significantly impacted the syllabus planning and teaching-learning process in the context of EFL. Notably, the teachers' and students' positive perceptions of the application of BDM substantiated the superiority of BDM over the traditional or FDM.

1. Introduction and Research Context

"Our lessons, units, and courses should be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books, and activities with which we are most comfortable. The curriculum should lay out the most effective ways of achieving specific results… in short, the

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best designs derive backward from the learnings sought." – Wiggins and McTighe (2005, p.14).

Curriculum and syllabus design concepts have been acknowledged as essential aspects of language education (Richards, 2013; Voogt et al., 2016). Rahimpour (2010) argued that there are different conflicting views on what distinguishes curriculum and syllabus. Consequently, in the first place, it is imperative to elucidate how these terms will be applied in this dissertation. According to Macalister and Nation (2019), a curriculum is a broad blueprint that involves consideration of principles, needs, and environments that contribute to the planning of an educational program. Here and now, the term **curriculum** will be applied as a broad national guide for teachers that sets the expectations for students learning for a particular area of study. On the other hand, Dündar and Merç (2017) claimed that the syllabus is a part of the curriculum where the teachers decide which approaches, methods, strategies, activities, and techniques they apply in the classroom to reach the intended students' learning outcomes. Henceforth, the term **syllabus** in this dissertation will be applied as a concept that summarizes the topics to be covered, or unit plans to be taught in a particular subject. In teaching the English language, "the development and implementation of language teaching programs can be approached in several different ways, each of which has different implications for curriculum design." (Richards, 2013, p.5). She pointed out that the syllabus design could be done by applying three main approaches: The Forward Design Model (FMD), the Central Design Model (CDM), and the Backward Design Model (BDM). Due to this, teachers are considered the essential elements when designing the syllabus for their subjects and connecting them with the main requirements of the national curriculum (Espinosa & Soto, 2015).

This study was conducted in Ecuador. It is the smallest of the Andean countries, located on the northwest side of South America. This country has 17 million inhabitants in 256,370 km2, and it is distributed in four regions: Coastal (Coast), Andean (Sierra), Amazon (Oriente), and Insular (Galápagos Islands) (Garrido et al., 2021). The education system in Ecuador is divided into three main sections. Pre-primary, elementary, and basic education (named Educación General Básica EGB); secondary education (mandatory and called Bachillerato General Unificado BGU); and tertiary education (Alvarado et al., 2020; Wierucka, 2021). Regarding teaching EFL in Ecuador, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education MINEDUC (2014) established that EFL subject is mandatory for public, religion-driven, and private institutions from the second grade of primary school to the last year of high school. Furthermore, the MINEDUC (2016) provided the National English Curriculum, which established the national objectives and educational standards that contain the methodological suggestions to be applied in the EFL classrooms and the coding system that must be used for syllabus planning. Likewise, this national curriculum includes new methodologies and strategies to enhance students' English proficiency.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the continuous endeavors of MINEDUC to improve EFL education in Ecuador, the expected results have not been obtained because of constraints such as the lack of teacher training and professional development and the heavy load of extracurricular activities (Alvarez & Ha, 2022). Machado (2019) stated that compared to Latin American countries, Ecuadorian students from secondary and university levels received the lowest English proficiency score in a standardized international exam provided by the English First Organization (EF) in 2019. Therefore, the ineffective connection between the EFL national

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curriculum principles and teaching practices and the existent disconnection between language curriculum, policy, and actual classroom reality are essential factors that affect teaching EFL (Salinas, 2017; Zhang & Liu, 2014). Ecuadorian EFL teachers plan their syllabus by focusing on a language-centered approach and following the sequence of contents established in the teachers' guide textbooks (Alvarez & Ha, 2022; Rea & Sánchez, 2018). The teachers "are required to develop students' communicative competence, but the final exams are predominantly grammar-oriented." (Acosta & Cajas, 2018, p.102). Therefore, Ecuador's English Language Teaching syllabus planning is mainly associated with the Forward and Central Design Model. After a detailed exploration of the existing research on ELT and EFL in Ecuador, it is noticeable that too little attention has been paid to the investigation of syllabus planning in teaching EFL. There is still a broad gap in how the syllabus planning based on the BDM can be applied to link the Ecuadorian national curriculum's main requirements with the classroom teaching practices in order to improve students' language achievements. Consequently, the lack of research in this area encouraged the researcher to conduct the present study to explore and reveal teachers' and students' perceptions of applying the BDM in the context of teaching EFL by offering new perspectives to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, stakeholders, curriculum designers, and language teachers with an innovative and updated way to plan language teaching courses or units. The expected outcomes of this study lie in helping EFL teachers focus on clear objectives and desired results by stimulating their students' authentic performance. Using the BDM planning template, teachers will align curriculum requirements, CEFR principles, assessments, and learning experiences toward the performance task students must conduct at the end of each unit.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore, reveal, and understand teachers' and students' perceptions of the application of the BDM in the context of teaching EFL to:

O1: explore, describe, and interpret teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the application of the BDM in teaching and learning EFL.

O2: find out teachers' and students' insights on the application of syllabus design and performance tasks based on the BDM in teaching and learning English, and finally,

O3: provide the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, curriculum designers, policymakers, and EFL teachers with a syllabus design based on the BDM to effectively connect the EFL national curriculum requirements and the teaching practices in the classroom.

2. Research Questions

The main research questions and related sub-questions driving this dissertation were as follows:

1. How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers in secondary education plan their teaching process?

1.1 What connections do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive between the Backward Design Model and the Ecuadorian EFL national curriculum?

1.2 What differences do Ecuadorian EFL teachers at the secondary level perceive between applying the Backward Design Model and the Traditional Design Model when planning their syllabus?

1.3 How does applying the Backward Design Model change Ecuadorian EFL teachers' planning and teaching practices?

1.4 How do teachers perceive the implementation of the performance tasks based on the Backward Design Model?

2. How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive the development of unit plans based on the Backward Design Model?

2.1 How does the implementation of unit plans influence Ecuadorian EFL teachers' planning and teaching?

2.2 How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive implementing the Backward Design Model for planning and teaching their classes?

2.3 How efficiently do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive unit plans based on the Backward Design Model to promote students' lifelong learning?

3. How does applying performance tasks based on Backward Design planning affect Ecuadorian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of learning English?

3.1 How do teachers perceive the application of performance tasks in teaching English?

3.2 How do students perceive the application of performance tasks helping their autonomous learning?

3.3 How do students perceive the implementation of performance tasks affecting their creativity?

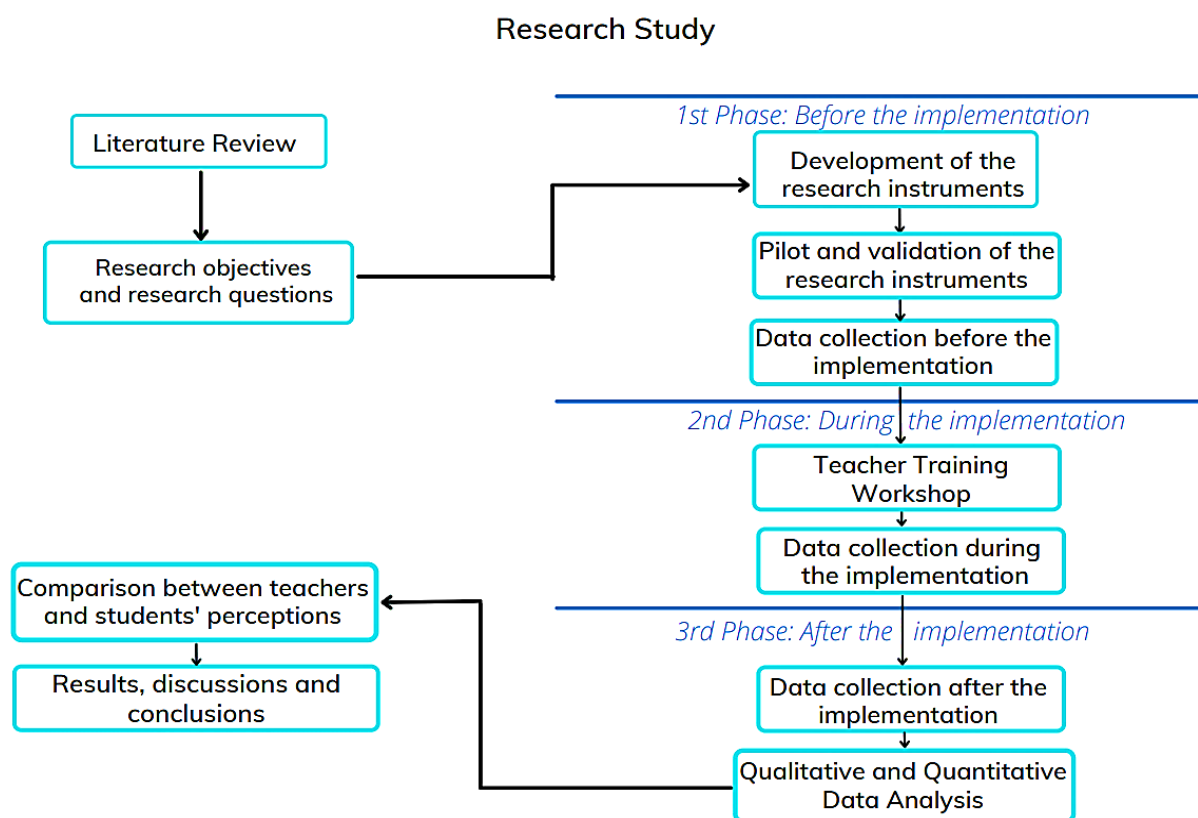3.4 How do students perceive the implementation of performance tasks developing their English language skills?

3. Research Methodology

Considering the aims and research questions of this dissertation, the direction of this study is led by the Pragmatism research philosophy, which "allows and guides mixed methods researchers to use a variety of approaches to answer research questions that cannot be addressed using a singular method." (Doyle et al., 2009, p.175). Data were collected through mixed methods procedures (Creswell, 2017). Creswell et al. (2007) defined mixed methods as "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry." (p.4). Thus, triangulation of the collection was possible to enrich the information and enhance the accuracy of the findings (Kumar, 2018). As there was very little information in Ecuador about the EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of applying the BDM, this study follows an experimental research design. It is defined as "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or program of inquiry." (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p.4). In addition to gaining as much information about the topic, this is a longitudinal study since it explores the extent of changes in the phenomenon over time (Csizér, 2020; Dörnyei, 2007; Kumar, 2018). This dissertation also followed a convergent research design. The qualitative and quantitative data were collected in approximately the same timeframe, analyzed independently, and then integrated to identify possible sources of convergence or divergence (McCrudden et al., 2019). The quantitative approach examines the causal relationship between variables, while the qualitative approach

explores and interprets the meaning of individual and group perceptions of the established research topic Maarouf (2019). This research followed a three-phase design; the details and layout of its development are presented in Figure 1. It combines theory and practice to improve teachers' practices in the classroom and professional development (Niemi, 2018).

Figure 1

Three-phase research

Research Study

Literature Review	**1st Phase: Before the implementation**
	Development of the research instruments
Research objectives and research questions	Pilot and validation of the research instruments
	Data collection before the implementation
	2nd Phase: During the implementation
	Teacher Training Workshop
	Data collection during the implementation
Comparison between teachers and students' perceptions	**3rd Phase: After the implementation**
Results, discussions and conclusions	Data collection after the implementation
	Qualitative and Quantitative Data Analysis

3.1 Participants and Settings

The Ecuadorian Ministry of Education approved the study to be conducted in the academic year 2020-2021 (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Purposive sampling was applied for this study by selecting EFL teachers and students at secondary public schools

from different regions in Ecuador. The purposive sample helps ensure the research findings are credible to stakeholders (Denieffe, 2020). Therefore, this study comprised 16 Ecuadorian EFL teachers and 283 EFL students from high school (BGU). All the communications and permissions were written in Spanish since it is the first language of all research participants. The target teachers were contacted by their e-mail addresses to request participation in this study, following confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. Teachers voluntarily participated in this research by filling in a consent form. The teachers who participated chose one class to conduct this study in. After receiving a teacher training course, teachers initially contacted students to explain the main essential aspects of this study and asked them to participate. As for student participation gender, 53% were girls, and 47% were boys. The student age distribution was as follows: 14 years old (13%), 15 years old (13%), 16 years old (33%), 17 years old (28%), and 18 years old (13%). When collecting data at the different schools, different types of classes were selected, most characteristically, in Year 1 of BGU (30%), in Year 2 of BGU (20%), and in Year 3 of BGU (50%). The teacher sample consisted of 16 Ecuadorian EFL teachers across various regions of Ecuador.

3.2 Instruments

To explore and gain insights into the EFL teachers' and students' perceptions about the implementation of the BDM and its components, the data collection tools used in this study were the following:

(1) Teachers' interviews

(2) Students' pre - questionnaire

(3) Teachers' unit plans based on the BDM

(4) Teachers' reflections on the implementation of the BDM

(5) Focus-group interviews with teachers

(6) Students' post - questionnaire

(7) Focus-group interviews with students

The individual and focus group interviews were piloted based on the four-phase process to develop and refine an interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016); the process of validating a long qualitative interview (Prescott, 2011); and (Qoyyimah, 2021), ethical data translation in qualitative educational research. Furthermore, all instruments received expert judgment from Ph.D. students, the supervisor of this research, and other university professors whose expertise falls within this field. The researcher, supervisor, and colleagues developed the questions and statements validated and piloted for each research instrument (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Likewise, two EFL teachers from Ecuador and one from the United States of America participated in the back-translation process of the instruments. Back-translation is a technique where two bilinguals participate; the first person translates from the source of the target language, and the second blindly translates from the target language to the original (Brislin, 2016). After this process, when the two versions of the target language are identical, he suggested that it is equivalent to the source in language form and can be applied as a tool for inquiry. The back-translation process was developed without any problem. The instruments had few changes; most were based on synonyms for the technical words, such as the Backward Design Model, performance tasks, and scaffolding learning. The next phase of this study consisted of pilot testing the instruments to determine flaws, limitations, or other research instrument issues (Kvale, 2011). This phase's main objective was to confirm, adjust, and redefine the instrument's content based on participants'

information (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Creswell et al., 2007). Consequently, all the instruments were in Spanish, the native language in Ecuador, which generated a comfortable and relaxing discussion of the interview's topics.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned before, this study consisted of three main phases. The first phase involved an initial qualitative part by conducting individual interviews with the teachers to explore EFL teacher perceptions and beliefs about English Language Teaching in Ecuador and to gain insights into how Ecuadorian teachers plan their syllabi. Besides, a questionnaire was applied to discover students' beliefs about learning English in Ecuador.   For the second phase of the study, based on findings from phase one, a two-week workshop was conducted for the 16 EFL teachers who participated in this study. The workshop for the teachers aimed to prepare teachers as skillful planners by covering the main characteristics of the BDM and the designing process of units based on the BDM template, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education requirements, and the CEFR descriptors. Here, teachers collaborated to associate the BDM aspects with the Ecuadorian national curriculum, the course books provided by MINEDUC, and their English language instruction. After learning about the BDM, the 16 teachers were divided into three groups to start planning the three units for the semester. The topics of these units were Security Protocols to Prevent Coronavirus, Environmental Issues, and the History of Our World. The teachers first started thinking about which will be the final performance task their students would perform in order to evidence their knowledge. Considering the performance tasks for each unit, the teachers started filling the BDM template by working together in Google Docs. In Stage 1, the teachers worked collaboratively to establish the expected desired results from their students. Thus, the established goals,

essential questions, enduring understandings, and skills that students need to achieve at the end of the unit were addressed by aligning and connecting the learning goals with the Ecuadorian national curriculum requirements and the CEFR descriptors. In Stage 2, the teachers established how to evaluate their students' achievements. The central aspect of this stage was the creation of the performance tasks based on the GRASP model. The third phase of this study focused on applying the units and performance tasks based on the BDM. This phase lasted six months of the school year and covered three units. During the application, different research instruments, such as teachers' reflections, were applied to obtain in-depth information to answer the research questions of this study. After implementing the three units, individual and focus group interviews and students' post-surveys were conducted with teachers and students to gain their perception of using the BDM in the teaching-learning process.

3.4. Data Analysis

Considering the research questions of this dissertation, different qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to gain in-depth information about the topic of this study. This dissertation applied descriptive statistics to summarize the data and calculate means, percentages, and frequencies. Additionally, the SPSS was utilized to perform the Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability test of the two questionnaires. The data collected from students' pre- and post-questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Software. This software analyzes descriptive and inferential data using keywords and commands readily comprehensible to the users (Zou et al., 2019). The quantitative data analysis process contains two main phases. First, the pre and post-questionnaires were exported from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel; then, the data was organized, categorized, cleaned for analysis, and

exported to SPSS. An identification number was assigned to each questionnaire from 1 to 283. Besides, Cronbach Alpha was established to test the internal consistency coefficients of the constructed scales of the questionnaires. Dörnyei (2007) claimed that to show satisfactory internal reliability, the values of the coefficients must be higher than 0.7 on a scale of .00 to 1.0. The pre and post-questionnaires applied in this dissertation showed reliability of .0950 and 0.947, respectively. These results showed high values, which indicated that "none of the scales should be discarded for future analysis" (Csizér, 2020, p.90). **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.** show the results obtained in the students' questionnaires. The descriptive statistics measures were calculated to describe or summarize the main characteristics of the sample and calculate the mean, frequency, and percentages for the scales of each questionnaire (George & Mallery, 2018). This dissertation was designed to be exploratory research; therefore, no factor analysis was needed to be conducted (Csizér, 2020).

The qualitative data analysis process was conducted to explore in-depth the teachers' and students' insights from individual interviews, focus group interviews, teachers' planning based on the BDM, and teachers' written reflections. Thus, thematic and content analysis were applied in this section. The thematic analysis (TA) method is an analytical process that involves coding and theme development from qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017); (G. A. Bowen, 2009). Terms such as credibility, transferability, confirmability, reliability, dependability, and authenticity were used while analyzing the data to determine the trustworthiness of its analysis (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen, & Elo, 2020). This analysis followed the (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) process. First, the collected data was transcribed to notice patterns and familiarize participants with answers. Then, it was disassembled to create

meaningful grouping through coding. After that, the codes or categories were put together into context to create themes hierarchically. This whole process was carried out by two other researchers to validate that the data coding was consistent. Furthermore, document analysis also was applied as a data source for the present study. Bowen (2009) claimed that document analysis is a tool for qualitative research that involves skimming, reading, and interpreting the documentary evidence to answer specific research questions. For this purpose, various documents provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education and empirical articles were examined to understand how the Ecuadorian Educational system works. Table 1 summarizes the data sources to gather information to answer the research questions and sub-questions of this study and the methods applied to analyze this information.

Table 1

Overview of data sources and data analysis

Research Question	Data sources	Methods of analysis
1. How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive using the Backward Design Model in their teaching process?		
1.1 How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers in secondary education plan their teaching process?	Pre- individual Interviews Ecuadorian EFL National Curriculum (2016), National Curriculum Specifications for EFL Teaching and Learning (2014), and English Standards (2012)	Thick description of the teaching context Document analysis Descriptive Statistics Thematic Analysis
1.2 What connections do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive between the Backward Design Model and the Ecuadorian EFL national curriculum?		
	Focus-group interviews Teachers' reflections (Google Docs)	Thematic analysis Document analysis
1.3 What differences do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive between the Backward Design and Traditional Model when planning their syllabus?		
	Focus-group interviews Teachers' reflections (Google Docs)	Thematic analysis Document analysis
1.4 How does implementing the Backward Design Model change Ecuadorian EFL teachers' planning and teaching practices?		
	Focus-group interview (teachers)	Thematic analysis Document analysis
1.5 How do teachers perceive the implementation of the performance tasks based on the Backward Design Model?	Teachers' reflections	
	Focus-group interview (teachers)	Thematic analysis Document analysis

	Teachers' reflections	

2. How do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive the development of unit plans based on the Backward Design Model?

2.1 What do Ecuadorian EFL teachers think about using the Backward Design Model for planning and teaching their classes?	Focus-group interview Teachers' reflections	Document analysis Thematic analysis
2.2 How efficiently do Ecuadorian EFL teachers perceive implementing unit plans based on the Backward Design Model to promote students' lifelong learning?	Focus-group interview (teachers) Focus-group interview (students) Teachers' reflections	Document analysis Thematic analysis

3. How does the application of performance tasks based on Backward Design planning affect Ecuadorian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions?

3.1 How do students from secondary education perceive learning English as a Foreign Language in Ecuador?	Focus-group interview (teachers) Focus-group interview (students) Teachers' reflections Students' pre-post questionnaires	Thematic analysis Descriptive Statistics Students 'questionnaire
3.2 How do students perceive the application of performance tasks helping their autonomous learning?	Focus-group interview (teachers) Focus-group interview (students) Teachers' reflections Students' pre-post questionnaires	Thematic analysis Descriptive Statistics Students 'questionnaire
3.3 How do students perceive the implementation of performance tasks affecting their creativity?	Focus-group interview (teachers) Focus-group interview (students) Teachers' reflections Students' pre-post questionnaires	Thematic analysis Descriptive Statistics Students 'questionnaire
3.4 How do students perceive the implementation of performance tasks developing their English language skills?	Focus-group interview (teachers) Focus-group interview (students) Teachers' reflections Students' pre-post questionnaires	Thematic analysis Descriptive Statistics Students' questionnaire

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted by following different ethical considerations. All the instruments were designed, validated, and piloted by following the guidelines proposed by (Brislin, 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; J. Creswell & Poth, 2016; Kvale, 2011; Prescott,

2011; Qoyyimah, 2021). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, all the instruments were checked and received expert judgment from Ph.D. students, the supervisor of this research, and other university professors whose expertise falls within this field. This study was conducted in 14 Ecuadorian secondary public high schools. The Ecuadorian Ministry of Education administrates these schools, and English as a Foreign Language is a compulsory subject. Henceforth, the first step in conducting this research was obtaining the permission of the MINEDUC.

After receiving permission from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, an invitation letter was sent to the principals of different schools in Ecuador who were in charge of sending it to the English teachers (**Error! Reference source not found.**). This letter included the essential information of this research, and it was made clear that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential. Furthermore, it established the schedule for the full implementation of this study and recognized this research's right to privacy and freedom of movement. Finally, it was indicated that at the end of the implementation, teachers would receive a certificate for their participation.

4. Overall Summary of the Findings of the Dissertation Study

4.1 The Investigation of Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Teaching-Learning Process in Ecuador

The first phase of this study aimed to explore the perceptions that teachers and students have concerning the EFL teaching-learning process in Ecuador. The rationale behind this phase was twofold. First, to obtain holistic and general insights into how teachers plan their instructional design, teaching materials, assessment, and learning activities. Hence, to

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determine if they are applying the Forward, Central, or Backward Design to plan their syllabus, units, and lessons. The second aim was to obtain students' perceptions of the materials, activities, strategies, and assessments applied when learning English at school. Analyses of the interviews showed that all the teachers considered some incongruence between the Ecuadorian EFL national curriculum and their teaching practices. The findings showed that all the participating teachers were concerned about the national curriculum's expectations and principles because they were not adapted to the reality of the Ecuadorian educational context. The teachers mentioned that although the reformed curriculum, established in 2016, tried to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in Ecuadorian secondary schools, various factors hindered them from carrying out the intended curriculum. These obstacles included a lack of teacher training and technological resources, students' low English proficiency and motivation to learn the language, excessive extracurricular activities, and the inconsistency of course books with the students' English level. Similarly, all the teachers believed that the main issues they found when planning their teaching-learning process were the excessive mandatory and desirable objectives each school year and the confusing coding system in developing the micro-curriculum planning. The participants also found teaching EFL in Ecuadorian secondary public institutions challenging. Although all the teachers indicated that teaching English in Ecuador was not an easy job, it had been established that they had substantial experience in teaching EFL in Ecuadorian public schools. The teachers' most common aspects were planning, assessment, and activities and materials applied in the classroom. An overall belief was that projects were the best way to assess students' English skills. All the teachers believed that the new coursebook provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education included engaging and contextualized content. However, it mainly focused on writing and reading English skills,

which was unsuitable for the students' English proficiency. Even though none of the participants has said it directly, according to the teachers' answers, they are assumed to apply the traditional or Forward Design Model to plan their syllabus and units.

In terms of students' perceptions of learning English as a Foreign Language in Ecuador, they had positive perceptions. However, a closer examination of the findings indicated that there are also some statements such as activities applied in the classroom 57.6%, 53.4%; the lack of application of different types of instruments 41.2%; the scarce integration of speaking activities 61.5%, and the authenticity of activities 40.1% are factors that, according to the students, hinder them from improving their language skills. Regarding the results, most students enjoy learning English. They either strongly agreed or agreed with almost all the criteria; for instance, they strongly agreed that the activities provided by teachers are interesting 44.3%, the constant monitoring 48.9% and guidance from teachers 56.9%, and the development of final projects 27.1% are the main factors that make them enjoy their English classes. Furthermore, the participants perceived that English lessons are based on covering the content of the course book by mainly focusing on grammar approach and writing and reading skills. Most students (74%) strongly agreed that their English classes mainly cover the course book's content to achieve the learning objectives. The students either strongly agreed or agreed that the English classes mainly focus on improving grammar 84.4%; only 4.2% disagreed with this statement. In terms of English skills, the students perceived that the English classes mainly focused on reading skills, followed by writing, speaking, and listening skills. Regarding assessment, students are familiarized with different types of assessment and evaluation tools. The tools that most students have experienced are end-of-unit tests 77.1%, final projects 72.9%, written tests 74.4%, reading comprehension

tests 75.6%, and final exams 76.7%. Almost half of the students agreed that they applied rubrics to evaluate their final project, 59.9%. On the other hand, observation 64.1%, checklists 66.4%, and daily assessment 42.7% are the main factors students have not experienced in evaluation. Finally, only 55% of students believed that the evaluation instruments were aligned with the content learned during the unit.

4.2 The Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of the Development of Unit Plans based on the Backward Design Model

The second phase of the present study explores the teachers' perceptions of using the Backward Design Model template to plan their syllabi and units. The rationale behind this phase was to gain deep insights and understand how satisfied teachers felt with applying the BDM template and its main characteristics in classroom teaching. To gain understanding and profound insights into this phase, teachers attended a two-week workshop where they were introduced to the BDM characteristics and had the opportunity to plan three units collaboratively. According to the teachers, designing the syllabus and unit plans based on the BDM principles was a complex but productive process. The teachers indicated that having an authentic and specific goal allowed them to teach toward this goal. They noted that applying the three stages of the BDM let them ensure that the content to be taught will remain focused and organized. The implementation of the BDM templates had a positive influence on the participants. All teachers indicated that working collaboratively to fill in the BDM templates allowed them to work more effectively in planning their syllabi. Besides, the teachers found remarkable the three stages presented by the BDM to clearly understand how the English instruction will be conducted. Likewise, all teachers agreed that applying the BDM and performance tasks promotes students' lifelong learning. All the teachers mentioned

real context and authenticity as how the BDM supports lifelong learning, and they even provided examples of how the students applied the learned knowledge and skills in real situations with different contexts. Nonetheless, even though all teachers had positive perceptions about implementing the BDM in their English classes, some teachers stated that planning using the BDM could not be applied in Ecuador because the Ministry of Education already provided them with a template to plan their syllabus, which is mandatory in public institutions.

4.3 The investigation of teachers' and students' perceptions of the application of the Backward Design Model

The third phase of this study explored the teachers' and students' perceptions of applying the Backward Design Model during the first semester of the school year. It was divided into two main groups to obtain fundamental insights and understandings of this study. The first group of research questions and sub-questions focus on the teachers' perceptions of applying the BDM in English teaching in the classroom. The second group of research questions and sub-questions concentrate on the students' perceptions of the BDM on English learning in the school. The rationale behind this phase was to gain deep insights and understand how teachers felt about applying the BDM in teaching. Besides, this phase focuses on gaining students' perceptions if they noticed any change related to the English learning process in their classroom; thus, to find out how effective the BDM and performance tasks were in comparison with the traditional way of teaching.

Analyses of the interviews showed that all teachers considered that there were strong connections between the Ecuadorian national curriculum and the BDM. The findings revealed that the primary relationships are related to the alignment to CEFR standards,

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scaffolding learning, authentic interpersonal interactions, communicative approach, autonomous learning, and CLIL Curricular Threads established by MINEDUC (2016). Moreover, the results showed that the participants found the application of the BDM as an authentic process where they could link the national curriculum requirements with their teaching context in a more organized and flexible way. These results are corroborated by Korotchenko et al. (2015), who stated that the BDM helps foreign language teachers effectively associate the national, state, district, or institutional education standards with the syllabus content, students' needs, and expected learning outcomes. The participants mentioned syllabus planning as the main difference they found between the Forward Design Model and the Backward Design Model. They indicated that following the unit template based on the BDM principles and aligning the teaching activities, strategies, and materials with the final performance tasks was the most remarkable difference between these two models. According to all the participants, the performance tasks based on the Backward Design Model are similar to the final projects students usually develop at the end of the unit or school year. However, the teachers claimed that the GRASPS elements allowed them to make the performance tasks more structured and organized than the traditional projects. From the interviews, the common themes mentioned by the participants were authenticity, real-life situations, roles, autonomous learning, creativity, and language skills. The teachers also indicated that applying the BDM helped students increase their language skills. They mentioned that even though the classes were online, they noticed their students' language improvements because they could use their language knowledge in different contexts. All teachers agreed that students improved their four primary language skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. However, writing and reading were the skills teachers mentioned that students improved the most.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that students' perceptions of the application of the BDM in their English classes were positive. From the focus-group interview responses, most respondents had positive perceptions of applying performance tasks based on the BDM. Regarding prioritizing content, most students either strongly agreed (47.7%) or agreed (36.7%) that creating performance tasks helped them focus on the essential ideas and concepts they learned in the classroom. Regarding instructions and steps to develop authentic performance tasks, most students strongly agreed that, during these units, it was easier to follow teachers' instructions, and the students had a better idea of the steps needed to create the final projects. All students who participated in the focus-group interviews indicated that developing the final projects in each unit is better than taking traditional exams. They also claimed that creating and customizing the final projects motivated them to learn and continue practicing their English skills, specifically speaking (69.6%), reading (73.9%), listening (68.2%), and writing (78.4%). Another goal of this dissertation was to investigate students' attitudes toward applying performance tasks to increase their creativity. Responses showed that, in general, students' initial attitudes towards performance tasks to increase creativity appeared to be positive. Moreover, they felt more confident and free to demonstrate and customize their ideas to create the final projects. In terms of supporting freedom, autonomy, and flexibility to express ideas, more than half of the participants agreed that performing final projects allowed them to express their opinions freely and creatively. All students approved that their final projects during the three units differed from the other projects they had created before in their English classes. They mentioned that these three projects allowed them to choose how each project would be developed and organized and the images, information, and facts they wanted to address. Most students perceive that using performance tasks and the GRASPS framework allowed them to create and customize their final projects in a

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flexible way that helped them use their creativity. Most students perceived that applying the performance tasks allowed them to foster autonomous learning skills. They explained that developing their final projects permitted them to find information from different resources, decide the content to be part of the projects, be responsible for their own learning, and learn from their classmates and external resources. Providing feedback is one of the main goals of the BDM to improve learning and performance tasks (McTighe, 2013). According to this criterion, most students (76.5%) indicated they *provided feedback to their classmates.* Likewise, most students (87.6%) indicated that *they learned from their classmates.* These results align with Wiggins and McTighe (2011), who claimed that the BDM requests teachers to plan their instruction based on different social and collaborative activities where students can foster their autonomous learning. Regarding organization, 90% of the participants mentioned that developing the performance tasks made them prioritize, choose, and decide how to organize the learned content to present the final project at the end of the unit. The students indicated that arranging the content fostered their autonomous learning since they had to return to the learned content and sometimes had to find new words and expressions they did not learn in class.

A significant emergent theme was related to the differentiation of teaching and learning. Most students stated that customizing their final projects according to their preferences, prioritizing the project's content, and having different options to present the project made them more motivated and interested in the English classes. Novelty appeared to be another emerging theme: a new way to plan the syllabus and align all the contents, activities, and teaching materials positively affected teachers' and students' perspectives. Even though planning backwards to achieve desired results is not new, this study found that

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all teachers did not know about this model. They indicated that planning based on the BDM template and the authentic performance tasks was the most innovative aspect of this study. Likewise, students said that developing the performance tasks based on the GRASPS framework was a new and meaningful process that allowed them to focus on how the tasks had to be done efficiently. Wiggins and McTighe (2005), who created this concept, manifested that the BDM allows teachers to plan their lessons, units, and courses logically and systematically based on the specification of learning outcomes that let students transfer their new knowledge in authentic scenarios. Besides, it intends to support teachers in developing and deepening students' learning and enduring understanding by generating authentic and meaningful educational experiences (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004). Thus, applying the performance tasks based on the GRASPS elements allows students to transfer learning to authentic scenarios.

5. Conclusions

This study was designed to explore the teachers' and students' perceptions of applying the BDM in fourteen public secondary schools in Ecuador's Highland and Amazon regions. The research mainly focused on finding teachers' perspectives on designing and applying the syllabus based on the BDM to teach EFL. Furthermore, the study investigated students' perceptions of using performance tasks based on the BDM to learn EFL.

The results of the study's first phase indicate that all the teachers considered some incongruence between the requirements established in the Ecuadorian EFL national curriculum and their teaching practices. They explained that although the national curriculum provides current and innovative teaching methodologies, they cannot be applied efficiently

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in Ecuador for different factors. For instance, designing the annual plan based on the MINEDUC requirements is complex and futile for the participants. The teachers explained that at the beginning of the school year, they have to fill in, design, and plan many documents, which is a waste of time because it simply copies and blends the documents without contextualizing the planning according to the reality of each school. Consequently, the teachers confirmed that those factors influenced them to apply traditional grammar-translation methods in most of their classes. In addition, planning the syllabus based on the coding system proposed by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education is another factor that demotivated English teachers from working effectively. All the teachers agreed that planning using the coding system proposed by the Ministry of Education is the most confusing and challenging part of planning the syllabus, and they think that designing the syllabus based on the coding system is just a waste of time. When planning the syllabus, it was found that all the teachers followed the traditional design, which started with deciding the content to be taught, then the teaching process, and finally, the assessment instruments to evaluate students' outcomes (Richards, 2013). Furthermore, it was found that even though the teachers applied the grammar-translation methods frequently in their lessons, they always tried to use meaningful activities and authentic materials from different sources.

Regarding students' perceptions of learning English as a Foreign Language, the research participants generally have positive perceptions of learning English as a Foreign Language. Most participants indicated that they enjoy learning English because the activities provided by their teachers are interesting, they have constant monitoring and guidance from teachers, and they enjoy developing the final projects. However, a high tendency of responders claimed that the activities and materials applied in the classroom were not

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authentic and were not connected with the main topic of each unit and the final projects they had to perform at the end of the unit. Besides, the students indicated that English lessons mainly cover the coursebook's content to achieve its objectives. Most students agreed that the English classes mainly focus on improving grammar, writing skills, and reading comprehension, and they claimed that their English classes are not focused on improving speaking and listening skills.

In the second phase, the data collection of this phase was limited to training the 16 English teachers to design the three first units of the syllabus and apply them in their English lessons. During the two-week workshop, the teachers learned about the BDM and its main characteristics and worked collaboratively to plan the first three units of the syllabus. In this phase, the unit planning designed by the participants and written reflections were the main instruments for obtaining data. As reported by teachers, designing the unit plans based on the BDM principles was a complex but productive process. The teachers highlighted the importance of planning by having an authentic and specific goal. They indicated that planning backwards gave them a better idea of what and how to teach based on the final goal or performance task. They noted that applying the three stages of the BDM let them ensure that the content to be taught will remain focused and organized. Besides, all teachers indicated that working collaboratively to fill in the BDM templates allowed them to work more effectively in planning their syllabi. The teachers found remarkable the three stages presented by the BDM to have a significant and clear idea of how the English instruction will be conducted. Finally, they claimed that the BDM is a more understandable and contextualized process than planning based on the code system proposed by the Ministry of Education. Even though all teachers had positive perceptions about implementing the BDM

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in their English classes, they agreed that planning using the BDM could not be applied in Ecuador because the Ministry of Education had already provided them with a template to plan their syllabus, which is mandatory in public institutions. Furthermore, they indicated that most Ecuadorian English teachers do not know how to design using the BDM, which will complicate integrating this model in the EFL classroom.

Finally, regarding phase three, the data was collected from all the participants at the end of the implementation through teachers' focus groups, students' focus groups, and a students' questionnaire. The qualitative research findings emerged from the analysis and codification of the interview transcripts, while the quantitative results were run using SPSS for statistical analysis. The analysis of the focus group interviews displays that all teachers considered that there are strong connections between the Ecuadorian national curriculum requirements and planning using the BDM. The findings revealed that the primary relationships are related to the alignment to CEFR standards, scaffolding learning, authentic interpersonal interactions, communicative approach, autonomous learning, and CLIL Curricular Threads established by MINEDUC (2016). Regarding syllabus planning, the participants mentioned that the Forward or traditional Design Model and the Backward Design Model differ. They stated that following the unit template based on the BDM principles and aligning the teaching activities, strategies, and materials with the final performance tasks was the most remarkable difference between these two models. Furthermore, they mentioned that planning backwards is a more authentic and meaningful process that allows teachers to plan flexibly according to their students' realities and necessities.

The teachers perceive that the performance tasks based on the Backward Design Model are similar to the final projects students usually develop at the end of the unit or school year. However, the teachers claimed that the GRASPS and WHERETO elements from the BDM allowed them to make the teaching process and final projects more structured and organized than traditional ones. They indicated that providing students with an actual situation, role, and specific criteria was one outstanding aspect of the BDM. All teachers mentioned creativity, autonomous learning, and lifelong learning as the primary skills students showed and improved when performing tasks based on the BDM. The teachers said that making the performance tasks open and flexible encourages students to show their creativity. Besides, the students learned autonomously by checking the topics covered in each unit to develop the performance tasks. Finally, all teachers agreed that applying performance tasks promotes students' lifelong learning because they could transfer the applied knowledge to authentic contexts. Regarding English language skills, the teachers perceived that applying the BDM helped their students enhance their listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills; nonetheless, they manifested that writing and reading skills were the most developed skills of their students. The teachers explained that students improved their English skills because they had a clear idea of developing the performance tasks and transferring the knowledge to different scenarios. Besides, they mentioned that their students had more opportunities to practice what they had learned through the unit by having the teaching materials and activities aligned with the desired outcomes. Concerning developing performance tasks to increase their primary English skills, most students showed positive perceptions of using the performance tasks based on the BDM to improve their English skills. Specifically speaking (69.6%), reading (73.9%), listening (68.2%), and writing (78.4%). These results are similar

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to those obtained from teachers, who indicated that writing and reading were the most English skills they developed when using the BDM.

6. Own Publications Related to the Dissertation

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