

Backwards Design for Content-Based Instruction: The Sustainability Vlog Project

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Content-based instruction (CBI) and project-based learning (PBL) motivate learners by offering opportunities to engage deeply with content, pushing them to expand their linguistic repertoire. However, complex project designs require clear structure. Backward design provides a structured approach for adapting or redesigning projects by prioritizing desired learning outcomes before developing assessments and instructional practices. This paper describes a project focused on sustainable living created using backward design principles. Through scaffolded activities, students were prepared to create a short, personal vlog reflecting on their experiences. The project was implemented in a first-year English discussion course, and teacher assessments and observations suggested gains in communicative competence, critical thinking about sustainability issues, and confidence in presenting ideas in English. The use of backward design helped ensure every step of the project was purposefully aligned with clear goals, resulting in an engaging, video-based outcome.

内容重視型言語教育 (CBI) とプロジェクト型学習 (PBL) は、学習者が内容に深く関わることで言語のレパートリーを広げ、学習意欲を高める効果がある。しかし複雑なプロジェクト設計には明確な構造が不可欠である。逆向き設計 (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) は、評価方法や指導実践を考案する前にまず期待される学習成果を優先させるので、プロジェクトの再設計に有効である。本稿では、逆向き設計の原則に基づき「持続可能な生活」に焦点化したプロジェクトを報告する。学生はスクリーンフォールディングを通じ、自らの経験を振り返る短い個人Vlogを制作する準備を行った。本プロジェクトを大学1年次の英語デ

ィスカッション科目に導入した結果、参加者はコミュニケーション能力、サステナビリティに関する批判的思考、英語でアイデアを提示する自信の向上を示した。逆向き設計の採用により、プロジェクトの各段階が明確な目標と整合され、魅力的な動画制作という成果につながった。

Content-based instruction (CBI) and project-based learning (PBL) have long been used to engage learners through meaningful content (e.g., de la Fuente, 2021a; Nation, 2007). When combined, these approaches encourage students to use language authentically, enabling them to explore subject matter in greater detail while expanding their linguistic repertoire. While beneficial, designing complex projects informed by CBI and PBL can be challenging (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

The backward design framework, initially developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), offers a clear structure for resolving these design complexities. Backward design emphasizes determining the desired outcomes first, thus ensuring that every subsequent step, including assessments and learning experiences, is aligned with clear goals. As such, the framework moves instructional planning away from beginning with textbooks or activities. By prioritizing learning objectives, lesson planning and curriculum design can become more structured and deliberate. The process encourages purposeful, outcome-driven planning.

This paper details the development and implementation of a sustainability vlog project within a language course, illustrating how the backward design framework can be applied to create highly engaging, context-based projects that foster communicative language skills and critical engagement with content.

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Literature Review

Content- and Project-Based Learning

To ensure a well-rounded language learning experience, instruction should be balanced across different types of learning. Nation (2007) proposed the “four strands” framework, which argues that a curriculum should consist of equal parts meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Within this framework, meaning-focused input facilitates learning through reading and listening. The materials must be comprehensible, and learners focus on understanding the content rather than the specific nature of the language used to convey the meaning. Similarly, the meaning-focused output strand requires learners to focus on producing comprehensible language with the focus on conveying meaning rather than specific language forms. This strand facilitates language acquisition through speaking and writing. The study of linguistic rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation falls under the language-focused learning strand. Finally, the fluency development strand strengthens knowledge developed in the other strands.

The four strands framework fits well within other frameworks of language learning that highlight the communicative aspects of language learning and use. Task-based learning (TBL) is commonly defined as an approach in which learners use language to complete meaningful tasks, with a primary focus on meaning rather than form (Ellis, 2003). Similarly, CBI emphasizes the integration of language learning with subject matter, where content serves as the vehicle for language development (de la Fuente, 2021a). PBL, meanwhile, involves learners engaging in extended tasks or projects that culminate in a final product, often requiring collaboration, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge (de la Fuente, 2021b). These approaches help language learners develop their skills under “real-operating conditions” (Batstone & Ellis, 2009, p. 199). Teaching approaches such as TBL, PBL, and CBI take a meaning-focused approach and align closely with the strands of meaning-focused input and output (Nation, 2007). By focusing on meaning rather than just form, students are pushed to use the target language to understand and convey real-world information. In addition, because all these approaches focus on meaning, learners are encouraged to negotiate for meaning when breakdowns in understanding occur. As learners interact and overcome these breakdowns, they develop both their communicative and language skills.

In sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2006), learning is said to occur within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The concept of the ZPD was originally defined by Vygotsky (1978) and refers to the distance between a learner’s independent problem-solving ability

and their potential development under a teacher’s guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Development occurs when a learner is assisted in a way that allows for completion of a task, but only when the assistance is adjusted to fall within the ZPD (Loewen, 2020). Scaffolding to achieve learning goals is therefore of central importance for teachers when developing a course or series of learning activities. If a task or content is too challenging for learners, it cannot be used effectively to help learners develop. This can lead to frustration and demotivation as they do not feel capable of development. On the other hand, when learning is scaffolded with level-appropriate activities, learners remain within the ZPD, experience increasing feelings of competency, and develop their skills. Scaffolding for linguistic development can occur both within an individual task as learners support each other and across a series of tasks as a course progresses.

Learner engagement is a further key consideration for instructors. Engagement is a multifaceted construct that has a significant impact on learning. Svalberg (2009, 2018) posited the engagement with language model, which highlights the impact of cognitive, social, and affective engagement on the development of conscious linguistic knowledge. Hiver et al. (2024), meanwhile, suggested that engagement consists of behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. When learners are cognitively engaged, the attention and mental effort required to process information are present, and learning can occur. A cognitively engaging task provokes interest and a greater desire to complete it than a less cognitively engaging task. Social engagement is also important in the language classroom when learners interact as part of the learning process. Opportunities for collaboration and support encourage social engagement. Affective or emotional engagement relates to how learners feel during the learning process. A challenging task might be cognitively engaging but result in limited learning if learners feel bored or apathetic toward it. Finally, behavioral engagement is the amount and quality of participation in the learning process. CBI and particularly PBL are considered to be effective approaches to language learning as they foster high levels of student engagement along multiple dimensions of the construct (Hiver et al., 2024; Svalberg, 2009, 2018).

Education for Sustainability

Since the turn of the millennium, and particularly since the establishment of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (United Nations, n.d.), the theme of sustainability has become increasingly common in educational settings. A fundamental idea behind the goals is that achieving a sustainable future requires a more cohesive approach to tackling global issues and awareness of how different facets interact. This in turn encourages interdisciplinary thinking.

Recently, foreign language educators have advocated for the integration of education for sustainable development (ESD) into language classrooms (e.g., de la Fuente, 2021a; Maijala et al., 2024), with a particular emphasis on the similarity between the educational approaches already used within the disciplines, namely PBL and learner-centered instructional approaches (de la Fuente, 2021b). As stated by Ferry (2021), these approaches can be used to proactively engage learners with real-world problems, providing them with opportunities to “enhance their communication and collaborative teamwork skills, and engage in self-reflection and critical thinking while working on open-ended, challenging issues with authentic tools and activities relevant to their lives” (p. 51). De la Fuente (2021b) also underlines that the discussion and negotiation of complex solutions required by ESD encourages the use of more advanced linguistic resources, thus pushing learners to develop their language skills.

The Backward Design Framework

The backward design framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) involves a specific sequence of planning steps that ensures alignment between instructional goals and activities. The process begins by identifying desired learning outcomes, which means defining exactly what students should know and be able to do upon completion of the unit or course. Once outcomes are defined, the next step is to design assessments that determine whether students have achieved those objectives. Finally, instructional activities are planned to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform successfully on the assessment and achieve the established goals. This methodology clarifies the process at each stage and creates a deliberate approach to curriculum design.

Backward design is a particularly useful approach when using CBI and PBL in the language classroom. It ensures careful consideration of what the content and language goals are and how they can be achieved through thoughtful scaffolding across a course. With the recent advent of generative AI and the corresponding impact on traditional research-based projects, it also offers teachers an additional opportunity to consider how to make parts of the learning process more AI-resilient (i.e., designed so that AI cannot substitute for actual learning).

Methodology

The Sustainability Vlog Project

The project was implemented in a compulsory first-year English discussion course at a private women’s university in western Japan. Students enter the university with a wide

range of English proficiency and are streamed accordingly. Class sizes typically range from 20 to 30 students. The discussion course meets twice weekly and utilizes themes and materials shared with an accompanying reading course, with one specific thematic focus being sustainability and everyday life. This paper describes the implementation of a classroom project rather than a formal research study. No student videos, identifiable student work, or personally identifiable information are included in the paper. A small number of students gave permission for their project videos to be shown for instructional purposes and during a conference presentation.

All students were required to bring an internet-enabled device (laptop computer or iPad) for use in lessons. The course textbook was provided digitally, with worksheets provided in a mixture of digital and paper-based formats. Work, including for this project, was submitted through Google Classroom. No specific instruction was given regarding how to create videos as part of the project, and students were encouraged to help each other by suggesting suitable applications to use. The majority of students used free software such as CapCut or Clipchamp. The project itself accounted for 10% of a student’s overall course grade.

The planning process for this project strictly adhered to the principles of the backward design framework, beginning with the definition of goals and moving systematically through subsequent stages.

Step 1: Learning Outcomes

In line with the backward design framework, the learning outcomes were established first and remained at the forefront of all lesson and activity planning. The desired outcomes for the project included improved communicative competence, ability to think critically about sustainability issues, and confidence in presenting ideas in English.

Step 2: Design Assessment

The main assessment designed to measure these outcomes was a short personal vlog lasting three to five minutes. The evaluation criteria focused on three areas: clarity and accuracy of English, presentation skills, and the student’s understanding of the sustainability topic. In addition to this main assessment, students’ reflections on the project were also evaluated, with evaluation centered on understanding of the topic. A formal assessment of communicative competence through evaluation of discussion work was considered but was deemed impractical for the current course.

Step 3: Plan Learning Activities (Scaffolding)

To ensure students could successfully complete the video assessment and achieve the outcomes, the learning activities were heavily scaffolded. The activities moved students from general awareness to personalized practice, discussion, reinforcement, and final reflection.

The scaffolded stages included:

1. Introduce language and ideas: Students were introduced to the content using tools such as the Worldview Upgrader (Gapminder Foundation, n.d.) and an ecological footprint calculator (Global Footprint Network, n.d.). Groups of students were assigned specific SDGs, after which they accessed the Worldview Upgrader website and took quizzes related to their assigned SDG to highlight common misconceptions. Guided worksheets were used to keep a record of relevant information, which students copied directly from the website and pasted into the relevant sections for subsequent tasks.
2. Personalize and raise awareness: Students began a daily journal to monitor their resource use. This moved them from learning through input (reading) to output (writing). Both linguistic and content knowledge were reinforced by learning through daily practice. The daily journal also encouraged critical evaluation of resource use and current lifestyles.
3. Share and expand: Discussions were held to consider *actionable* changes for living more sustainably. The focus on changes that students could make in their own lives promoted critical thinking while creating a concrete link between course content and students' experiences. The discussions also provided a chance for interactive practice and further promoted the development of productive vocabulary use.
4. Reinforce and reexamine: The daily journal continued, requiring students to record challenges and successes in living more sustainably (their actionable changes from the share and expand stage).
5. Reflect: Students reflected on their experiences through the final vlog and subsequent discussion. The reflection encouraged students to think critically about the sustainability learning outcomes, convey what they learned effectively (improved communicative competence), and develop confidence in their ability to use English effectively in the video presentation.

Implementation Adjustments for Proficiency

Recognizing that students had varied proficiency levels, implementation adjustments were crucial for ensuring equitable access to the project's complex content and for achieving the desired learning outcomes. While the overarching backward design framework was the same for the entire course, the tools used to achieve the learning outcomes were tailored to the specific needs of each group of students.

For a higher-proficiency class, a more open-ended approach was possible. For example, for the Worldview Upgrader activity, the higher-proficiency students were told to select two SDGs most directly connected to their daily lives. Because language concerns were less prominent for these students, they could handle greater latitude. In contrast, comparatively lower-proficiency students were likely to be overwhelmed by the same open-ended approach, possibly resulting in decision paralysis. To alleviate this, these students were provided with scaffolded materials to bridge linguistic and cognitive gaps. To ensure consistent engagement with the SDG content, students used a "Common Misconceptions" worksheet (see Appendix A) that introduced an element of gamified accountability. This required them to complete an online exam on their assigned SDG and provide a screenshot of their results as evidence of completion, effectively turning a reading task into an accountable, interactive activity.

The "Sustainability Diary" (see Appendix B) was designed to build on the foundational knowledge and language developed in the introductory stage and to link students' assignments to the final video assessment through multimodal data collection. Students were instructed to take photos and short videos of their daily habits such as energy use, food choices, and transportation. This provided them with a large collection of personal materials, raw footage, and concrete visual prompts to draw from when they began producing their final vlogs. Both groups followed the same procedure at this stage, but the higher-proficiency group was not limited to consideration of the SDGs listed on the sheet.

During the share and expand phase, structured communicative support was provided to the lower-proficiency group through a "Giving Advice" worksheet (see Appendix C). By offering a menu of explicit target language categories, including both stronger and gentler phrases for giving suggestions, the worksheet reduced the cognitive load of simultaneous content processing and language production. This allowed students to focus on the meaning of their interactions rather than struggling to recall specific grammatical structures. The higher-proficiency group was verbally reminded to use such structures but was not provided with a worksheet. For the higher-proficiency group, the

activity was adjusted to enhance cognitive engagement by requiring students to compare the relative difficulty of different actions. As part of their planning discussions, the students not only gave suggestions, but also were required to consider how challenging these suggestions would be, to incorporate a range of difficulties in the goals they set themselves, and to predict how successfully they could achieve different elements of their plan. This pushed the higher-proficiency learners to use a wider linguistic repertoire as they dealt with a more complex task.

Finally, the project concluded with a scaffolded reflection process structured into three distinct tasks. Students moved from individual notetaking on peers' videos to group comparisons of similarities and differences, ending with a personal written reflection on future sustainable habits. The same tasks were used for both groups, but the higher-proficiency group also gave a short summary presentation of the main ideas from their discussions and was encouraged to reflect on sustainability more widely (see Appendix D). The structured sequence of tasks ensured that even students with lower initial knowledge could engage in deep, critical analyses of the project's themes and recognize their own progress.

By differentiating the implementation through these scaffolded stages, the project ensured that students across all proficiency levels could achieve the same core learning outcomes: improved communicative competence, deeper critical awareness of sustainability, and greater confidence in presenting ideas in English.

Outcomes and Reflections

The project yielded several positive outcomes, particularly in terms of student engagement and motivation. Formal quantitative analysis of student performance was not conducted due to ethical constraints and the scope of the project. The overview that follows therefore reflects the instructors' assessments and classroom observations, based on the established evaluation criteria.

Student vlogs were assessed in terms of clarity and accuracy of English, presentation skills, and understanding of sustainability concepts, corresponding to the intended learning outcomes of improved communicative competence, critical thinking, and confidence in presenting ideas. Across these categories, the majority of students were able to communicate their ideas clearly, to effectively utilize topic-specific vocabulary, and to exhibit a noticeable development in overall fluency. In terms of content, many students demonstrated the ability to connect sustainability concepts to their daily lives and to reflect critically on their habits. Presentation skills also showed improvement,

with a number of students exhibiting greater confidence through more sustained speech and clearer organization of ideas.

Students demonstrated high involvement, which was likely enhanced by the video format and the opportunity to experiment with popular effects they had seen on social media platforms. In fact, some students in the lower-proficiency class who were typically more reticent in class discussions produced videos in which they used far more language than they typically did in lessons. Sharing an example from a previous year also appeared to make the initial engagement phase easier and more concrete for the students. Furthermore, the chosen theme of sustainability in daily life seemed to increase motivation levels as it was easy for students to relate to, talk about, and explore something that they were directly experiencing. The emphasis on students' own lives may also have limited students' use of generative AI, helping them to see what they could achieve using their own abilities.

Regarding learning and understanding, students engaged more readily with content that was directly linked to their own experience. The students could integrate new ideas into their existing knowledge base and develop the language they needed to express ideas that were relevant to them. However, their learning about sustainability was not limited to everyday sustainability. Rather, it spanned both local and global levels. For example, some students reported information they found surprising in their Worldview Upgrader quiz results, while others recognized and discussed different human responses to rising global temperatures.

Furthermore, the project suggested that encouraging peer learning through structured activities, including group work, can be highly beneficial. These activities were particularly helpful for students who began the project with limited vocabulary or initial knowledge about sustainability, as the collaborative structure allowed them to learn from and support one another. Since language is a skill that inherently requires development and practice, the use of scaffolding tasks to implicitly include practice and learning opportunities was highly effective and greatly facilitated by the backward design framework. The combination of social engagement and supported learning activities heightened the overall educational experience, as students benefited from exploring their shared experiences at different stages of the project.

Finally, the project appeared particularly valuable for skill development. It served to build a variety of multimodal skills, including planned (video-based) and unplanned (discussion) speech delivery, organizational planning (for both their sustainable actions and the structure of their video), and editing skills. The backward design framework

made it possible to effectively integrate and balance the development of these skills in the language classroom.

Conclusion and Implications for Language Teaching

The outcomes of this project suggest several implications for language teaching practice. First, alignment is essential when designing complex, large projects. The backward design framework successfully achieves this by clearly aligning the instructional objectives, the subsequent assessment, and the planned learning activities, ensuring a cohesive and purposeful learning experience for students. Second, scaffolding supports skill development. It is important that tasks are explicitly scaffolded to provide incremental practice and targeted learning opportunities. This approach is necessary to effectively support students with varying levels of language proficiency as they work toward achieving the desired outcomes. Third, language educators should leverage context and meaning in their project design. Projects that are meaningful and context-based, allowing students to use language that is directly connected to their daily lives, can markedly boost motivation and engagement. For instance, the sustainability theme used in this project was highly relatable and concrete, which fostered meaningful learning and provided clear, authentic goals for the students. Finally, encouraging peer learning through group work and collaborative elements yields substantial benefits. Such activities are particularly helpful when students begin a project with limited vocabulary or initial knowledge about a specific topic, as they allow students to learn from and support one another.

Despite the positive outcomes observed, this project has several limitations. First, the project was implemented within a single institutional context and involved a relatively small number of first-year university students, limiting the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the project outcomes were evaluated primarily through classroom performance and teacher observations rather than formal, standardized quantitative analysis. Future work could involve more systematic investigation of student learning outcomes, including longitudinal studies examining the development of communicative competence, learner engagement, and sustainability awareness over time. Further research could also explore how similar backward design frameworks can be adapted for different topics, institutional contexts, or degrees of technology use.

Ultimately, clarifying instructional goals for the teachers makes those goals clearer for the students. This clarity leads to better student buy-in when they recognize the purpose of the goals and the authentic outcomes they can share beyond the classroom. The

sustainability vlog project illustrates how the backward design framework can be used to develop larger, complex assignments. It functions to help instructors align objectives, assessment, and learning activities, and thereby provide their students with impactful learning opportunities.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Common Misconceptions Worksheet

Common Misconceptions Worksheet

Click on [this link](#) and access the website. The website is about the SDGs and the common misconceptions that people have.

For our ID1 topic of Sustainability, we are interested in SDGs 2, 7, 12, and 14. You will be assigned a specific SDG. If you don't know what your SDG is, ask Dr. Wong.

1. Read this worksheet **before** you start any of the work.
2. Click on your assigned SDG on the website. You will see Exercises, Questions, and Exam.
3. Complete the Exercises and Questions first.
4. After you have finished the Exercises and Questions on the website for your assigned SDG, complete the review tasks below.
5. After you have completed the review tasks, take the Exam.
6. When you pass the Exam, take a **screenshot** saying that you completed the exam.
7. Paste the screenshot at the bottom of this worksheet and submit this to Classroom.

Review Tasks

Which SDG were you assigned?	☐ SDG 2 – Zero Hunger ☐ SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy ☐ SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production ☐ SDG 14 – Life Below Water
Which questions did you answer incorrectly? <i>Copy the questions from the website and paste them below.</i>	
For each question you answered incorrectly, what percentage of people got the answer wrong? (look for “__% get this wrong”)	
Using information that you have learned from this activity, how can you live more sustainably regarding your assigned SDG?	

Screenshot

When you complete the exam, take a screenshot of the message and paste the image here.

Appendix B

Sustainability Diary Worksheet

Sustainability Diary

Keep a diary about ***your normal, everyday life*** and things that you see around you.

Record information about how you live (e.g., type of transportation used, food you eat, electricity you use, purchases you make) for one week (6/25-7/1). Take photos and/or short videos. These will help you with later work.

For more ideas, please check the Daily Activities in the “Goals of SDGs 2, 7, 12, and 14” document in Classroom.

Appendix C

Giving Advice Worksheet

Sustainability Planning Sheet - Giving Advice

Look at your partner’s diary. What did they record about their lifestyle?

Use the target language in the box below and give them advice to be more sustainable. They will try to follow your advice for one week.

Proposing an action [*stronger*]

You should ...

You could ...

You might ...

You have to ...

Making suggestions [*gentler*]

It might be a good idea to ...

Why don’t you ...

I think you should ...

What advice do you have for your partner to live more sustainably every day? Write them below.

If you want some ideas, take a look at the daily activities in the *Goals of SDGs 2, 7, 12, and 14* document.

Appendix D

Review Worksheet

Sustainable Futures Project - Review

Video Notes

Please copy a picture of the notes you took whilst watching your classmates' videos.

Discussion Notes

Please copy a picture of the notes you took whilst discussing your videos and sustainable living.

Reflection

Reflect on your work for this project. You can use the following questions to guide your response, but you do not have to answer all of them.

- What have you learned about the challenges of living a more sustainable lifestyle?
- What impacts your ability to live sustainably?
- In what ways does society help, or hinder, living more sustainably?
- What kinds of changes in society do you think would help create a more sustainable future?

You should write a short essay. Please use correct formatting (paragraphs, indents, etc.) and check your work before submitting.