**KATHLEEN PINKMAN**
**Kwansei Gakuin University**
**Uegahara, Nishinomiya**
**Japan**
**kmpinkma@yahoo.ca**

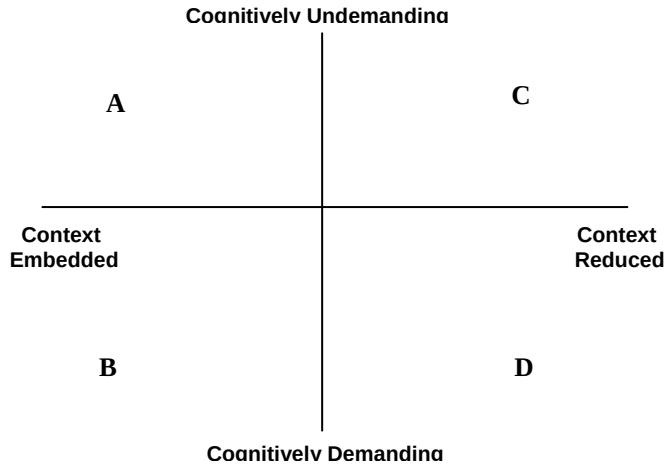
## *Learning by Design: Using an online curriculum development tool to design a context-rich EFL curriculum at Universidad Catolica de Valparaiso*

### Introduction

*BICS-CALP*

The distinction between contextualized and decontextualized language has become a fundamental element in understanding language development in ESL/EFL learners. Early researchers such as Olson (1977) and Donaldson (1978) suggested that a difference between conversational language proficiency and academic language proficiency is necessary in understanding the language acquisition process (Cummins, 1994).The importance of this distinction has led to the development of different conceptual frameworks outlining language acquisition in these terms. One such framework is the BICS-CALP continuum (Cummins, 1994). This framework is illustrated by two intersecting lines forming a grid. The vertical axis represents cognitive demands of language learning, and the horizontal axis represents the range of contextual clues available to a learner (see figure 1). This model conceptualizes Cummins' ideas on basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP).

**Figure 1: BICS-CALP Framework**
**Contextual Support vs. Cognitive Involvement (Cummins, 1994)**




This framework has become the cornerstone of many curriculum design approaches, including the online curriculum tool Learning by Design, because it offers a clear justification for providing context-rich materials to aid students of all levels in reaching higher level and academic proficiency goals.

*Learning by Design*

Developed at the University of Calgary by ESL researchers and professionals, Learning by Design is an online curriculum tool that uses a step-by-step approach to aid instructors in developing context-rich instructional units. The tool was inspired by theories, such as the BICS-CALP continuum, that stress the need to include context in ESL material in order to aid students in negotiating meaning. The tool encourages instructors to identify and integrate language, strategies and concepts into their units. It also stresses the importance of providing scaffolding, recycling language, and spiraling towards ultimate language goals within each unit (Bortolin, 2003).

In the winter of 2003, Learning by Design was piloted as a course for ESL professionals at the University of Calgary. In this course, instructors and curriculum designers used the tool to design mock-units. The purpose of the project in Chile, however, was to use the tool in an authentic teaching situation to determine the usefulness of such a tool, as well as to decide if this tool and the theory on which it is based were applicable beyond the K-12 range for which it was initially designed. If the tool was usable in post-secondary contexts, its value as a professional resource would be further defined.

### Methodology

Two EFL instructors from the University of Calgary piloted a curriculum design approach at the Catholic University of Valparaiso (UCV) in Chile. The objective of this project was to test the practicality of using the online curriculum design tool, Learning by Design, by developing a context-based EFL curriculum for the Faculty of

Natural Resources at UCV. Given that there was no pre-existing EFL program at the university, the instructors were responsible for designing and implementing the entire course. The course was offered to all students. Eighty students signed up to take the non-credit English language courses on top of their regular course load. A diagnostic test was designed and administered to place students in one of two levels. The classes were 90 minutes and convened three times per week for six weeks. The instructors designed their units using Learning by Design, and evaluated their effectiveness by interviewing students at the end of the course and also by reflecting on the process of curriculum development that they undertook.

## Discussion

*Needs assessment*

An informal needs assessment was performed by the instructors after enrollment but prior to designing the UCV courses. This needs assessment involved interviewing students on their expectations of the course and talking with various university administrators about what they hoped the courses would accomplish for their students and their institute. This informal needs assessment determined that students had different expectations of the course. Some students were interested in pursuing post-graduate degrees at foreign universities and therefore wanted the courses to focus on academic writing and reading skills. Other students, however, wanted a communicative focus and to practice only oral communication skills. The administrators wanted to promote the courses as a cultural exchange, thereby encouraging students to study abroad and balance out the university's foreign exchange enrollment. The instructors determined, therefore, that the needs of the students and the university were varied and different.

Learning by Design, the online curriculum tool used in this project, altogether omits needs assessment from its format. In designing EFL courses at UCV, however, the instructors felt that a needs assessment was perhaps the most important aspect of the curriculum design. The variation in responses from students and faculty made the design process problematic, and it would have been better to have administered a more formal needs assessment, such as a survey or questionnaire, before students had even been enrolled in the classes. This information would have been useful in determining which student was enrolled in which class and what context would be used in each class. For all its comprehensiveness, Learning by Design unfortunately neglects perhaps the most important element of the curriculum process: determining the needs and interests of the students.

*Comprehensible input and teacher-made materials*

Many ESL professionals believe that students should be instructed only through authentic sources of language, and by extension teacher-prepared material, in order to uphold the principles of 'comprehensible input + 1' (Krashen, 1989). The idea of using teacher-made and authentic materials in the ESL/EFL context is consistent with the three main principles underlying Learning by Design. These principles are scaffolding, spiraling, and recycling language, concepts and strategies. Indeed, Learning by Design encourages its users to create their own material and even re-write authentic sources whenever possible to optimize the recycling of language and provide comprehensible input +1 at all times. At UCV, however, the practicality of using only authentic and teacher-prepared material was questionable. Although the theory of comprehensible input +1 is inherent in Learning by Design, and teacher-made materials encouraged, this approach can be overwhelming for the real-life professional. Resources, especially in developing countries, can be difficult to access, and instructors may not have the enormous amount of time necessary to prepare well-constructed and relevant material. Learning by Design may want to incorporate an option into its design, whereby professionals lacking the necessary time and resources can supplement their materials with ready-made material. Also, Learning by Design is hoping that in the future professionals will share their units online, thereby creating a bank of relevant, teacher-made materials to be used by time- and resource-strapped teachers. This availability of resources would help many teachers in different parts of the world, although ultimately the needs and interests of any one group of students will differ from many others, and this material may only provide inspiration for instructors.

## Conclusion

Learning by Design is a valuable tool for ESL curriculum developers and instructors. Its online nature makes it attractive and accessible from any location. Although Learning by Design appears most useful to the K-12 content-based ESL realm, the flexibility of its theory and layout also makes it a useful resource in EFL contexts. In piloting Learning by Design in an academic, EFL, Spanish-speaking environment, the author uncovered issues that Learning by Design needs to address if it is interested in making the tool more useful for EFL curriculum development. The author believes that the online tool would be more suitable in conditions beyond K-12 ESL if it included needs assessment instruction and design elements and incorporated allowances for ready-made materials.

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