




# Designing Units with the UbD Framework to Teach English as a Foreign Language: Benefits and Challenges

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore English language teachers' and English department heads' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of designing and delivering units using Understanding by Design (UbD) framework to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). UbD is a unit and curriculum design framework which aims for student understanding and its transfer into real life context through three stages: identifying the desired results, determining the assessment evidence, and planning learning activities. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaires from 39 English language teachers and five department heads, and semi-structured focus group interviews with seven teachers. The content and thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the teachers who implemented UbD within the context of their school perceived it as a design process with benefits on students' academic achievement and English language skills through its focus on the development of understandings and transfer. The findings also uncovered perceived challenges caused by institutional, instructional, teacher related and learner related factors. Teachers also found UbD implementations challenging due to the characteristics of online education during the global pandemic. These findings suggest that although UbD is not commonly used at schools in the Turkish EFL context, it can be offered as an alternative unit design practice if teachers' professional knowledge of its underlying principles is increased with regular in-service trainings on its proper implementation.

## Keywords

Understanding by Design (UbD), English curriculum design, unit design in EFL.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee permission for this study was obtained from Yeditepe University Committie of social and humanities ethics committee commission with the decision dated 10.05.2021 and numbered 17/2021.

**Suggested Citation:** Çelikman Hanratty, G., & Eveyik-Aydin, E. (2023). Designing Units with the UbD Framework to Teach English as a Foreign Language: Benefits and Challenges. *Sakarya University Journal of Education*, 13(3), 435-455. doi: <https://doi.org/10.19126/suje.1277604>

## INTRODUCTION

The field of education has undergone many changes over the past centuries. Unlike the past, the present day requires students to fully interact with the complexities of life (Bransford et al., 2000) since the world outside of schools requires many high order skills like critical and reflective thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration skills. Although the world has advanced in many ways, a lot of education is still reminiscent of the traditional approaches. Students still do not transfer what they learn at school to new situations to solve problems and tackle challenges (Bloom et al., 1956; Day & GoldStone, 2012). To solve this problem, Wiggins and McTighe (1998; 2005) offer a backward design framework for unit and curriculum design, UbD, which is based on the principles of ensuring student understanding and transfer of learning. The UbD framework has well-structured stages that set the objectives with the end results in mind, determine the evidence of learning, and plan the learning activities. Hence, it provides teachers with an effective plan for teaching. UbD bases its theoretical background on research from cognitive psychology and neurology as well as the works of Benjamin Bloom, John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, Ralph Tyler, and Hilda Taba (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). It is a combination of progressive educational approaches and significant scientific findings that allow teachers to teach in a more structured and systematic way. Its three-stage design process for designing curriculum, assessment and instruction focuses on deep understanding of important ideas and concepts, and transfer of learning through backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). These stages are as follows:

### Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

The best teaching starts with clear end goals in mind before the planning process starts (McTighe & Brown, 2020). Stage 1 determines what students should know and be able to do at the end of a unit to transfer their learning. It is the stage in which *enduring understandings* of the units, *essential questions* that lead students to think critically about the topic, and the required *knowledge* and *skills* that the students will need to show understanding of are framed. *Enduring understandings* are the big ideas that teachers want their students to leave the classroom with. They are the kind of understandings that are long lasting and are reinforced through application in real life situations. Enduring understandings are guided by *essential questions* which do not have clear cut answers and can be considered as the passages through which learners delve into the important concepts that might be unseen in the content and deepen their understanding. While enduring understandings and essential questions can be considered as open-ended exploration processes, the knowledge and skills framed in this stage form the basic elements that learners are expected to acquire.

### Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence

In Stage 2, teachers plan their assessments that are aligned with their desired goals in Stage 1. Teachers can use many types of evidence to test students' knowledge and skills such as observations, dialogues, vocabulary tests, unit quizzes and exams. In addition to these types of assessments, authentic performance tasks that require students to apply their learning to real life context to tackle challenges and problems can be utilized to test student understanding and transfer. UbD offers a performance task design tool, *G.R.A.S.P.S.*, to help teachers create authentic performance tasks considering the goal, role, audience, situation, product/performance & purpose, and standards and criteria for success (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Understandings and transfer can also be demonstrated through UbD's six facets of understanding. When learners truly understand, they can *explain* the reasons for events, concepts, incidents, phenomena or hypotheses; *interpret* by connecting things to one's own life,

reading between the lines rather than focusing on main events; *apply* their learning at school in various contexts in and outside of schools; *have perspective* looking from different points of view thinking critically; *empathize* by putting themselves in others' shoes, and notice hidden lives which can tell different stories that do not have a single ending, and *have self-knowledge* by noticing their capabilities, weaknesses, habits and their effect on one's life.

### Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

Stage 3 assists teachers in determining the learning activities built around the desired results and performance tasks. It enables teachers to double check whether the learning activities will lead to the desired results planned in Stage 1. It makes the teacher ask questions in the process of planning: What does a learning plan that aims for understanding look like? What do they need to learn to reach the desired results? The learning activities are aligned with other stages through the principles of *W.H.E.R.E.T.O.* which stands for enabling the students to understand *where* the unit is headed, *holding* their attention throughout, *equipping* them with tools and knowledge, and creating opportunities for them to *revise* their work, *evaluate* their progress, be *tailored* to reflect individual needs, and *be organized* to enhance deep understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.197-198).

The UbD framework with a language lens offers the same three-stage backward design in culturally and linguistically diverse classes with a specific focus on each student's language development (Heineke & McTighe, 2018). As students are exposed to authentic learning experiences through UbD and deepen their understanding, they automatically improve their language skills. During the process, UbD's stage 1 aims to teach the desired results and transfer goals by pinpointing the fact that students might have different linguistic knowledge and skills. Stage 2 emphasizes that even students with very low language proficiencies can achieve the desired results, hence a suitable assessment can be prepared. Stage 3 enables teachers to ensure that the learning activities are designed with students' different language backgrounds and abilities in mind. An example of a unit plan designed with UbD for a Turkish EFL classroom can be seen in Appendix A.

### Studies on Understanding by Design

Throughout the literature, there is consistent evidence that curriculum design based on UbD principles has a positive impact on student learning (Brown, 2004; Gloria et al., 2019; Noble, 2011; Yurtseven et al., 2013), and teacher development and teachers' attitude toward curriculum design process in various disciplines (Boozer, 2014; Kelting-Gibson, 2005; Graff, 2011; Gulsvig, 2009; Yurtseven et al., 2013).

In a study conducted with 41 fifteen-year-old students in the context of a study-school established to prepare students to have necessary knowledge and skills through UbD based curriculum combined with Moodle and Blended Learning to compete on a global scale, Florian and Zimmerman (2015) found that UbD practices enabled the students in the study-school to outperform those in the United States in PISA scores in reading, mathematics, and science. The results also showed that implementation of UbD helped students to gain the necessary skills to compete in the global market economy. Burson (2011) conducted a study with 13 in-service primary school classroom teachers enrolled in Curriculum Analysis and Design course to explore their perspectives on the effectiveness of UbD in increasing positive classroom behavior after being taught how to apply UbD. The study showed that participants were comfortable using UbD in their lessons and they believed it had a positive impact on their students' motivation to participate in the lessons and on classroom behavior. The participants also stated that the UbD framework enabled their students to transfer their knowledge into real life.

Focusing on music teachers' perspectives on the implementation of UbD, Johnson et al. (2017) conducted a study with 300 members of the National Association for Music Education who trained music teachers in their undergraduate courses where the program was designed by UbD. The results indicated that there was a low level of understanding of the principles of UbD and teachers were confused about the term "framework". However, teachers reported that UbD helped them to see the purpose of their teaching and that students showed a better and deeper understanding of the content. Uluçınar (2021) analyzed 12 studies on teachers' and students' experiences with UbD through a qualitative meta-synthesis process and found that teachers did not have enough experiences with UbD and sufficient pedagogical knowledge. The study also revealed some teachers' challenges such as the intensity of their workload and limited time. They also found it difficult to work with teachers who were unwilling to change and try new teaching methods. In addition, the findings showed that UbD had an effect on students' cognitive development in terms of motivation, understanding the purpose of the lesson, and developing deeper understandings.

### ***Studies on UbD in EFL Settings***

Studies on UbD are quite limited in number in EFL. A study conducted in a Colombian EFL context by Bolivar and Rodriguez (2017) focused on 26 tenth grade students' English-speaking skills in a speaking program designed according to UbD principles. The study showed that all the participants enjoyed learning English, improved their speaking skills, and found the lessons more meaningful than the traditionally designed lessons because they were able to connect the lessons to their own lives. The students were also able to show the six facets of understanding during authentic performance tasks. To investigate in-service EFL teachers' perspectives on implementing UbD, Anwaruddin (2013) organized three training workshops on UbD principles for the 21 EFL teachers in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The results revealed that the participants believed that they would be able to apply UbD in their EFL context. However, teachers were concerned about time management and finding enduring understandings related to their units in their skills-based program. Another study conducted by Yurtseven & Altun (2017) with 436 students and 10 teachers at the preparatory school of a state university in Türkiye investigated the impact of UbD on EFL teachers' professional development and students' English language achievement. The results showed that the students in the middle level group outperformed the other groups in their English achievement scores and that teachers benefited from it as well in terms of integrating more authentic use of language which was lacking in their coursebooks. Moreover, the teachers observed that students' motivation and participation had increased. The study also revealed teachers' challenges regarding time limitations and heavy workloads. In an experimental study conducted in an Iranian EFL setting, Hosseini et al. (2019) found that the writing classes designed with backward design improved the writing abilities of 100 EFL learners who were aged between 18 and 25 more than the classes with forward model design that starts with planning learning activities followed by assessments.

As mentioned earlier, the use of UbD framework remains relatively unexplored in the field of EFL, with this gap being particularly noticeable within the Turkish EFL context. Although UbD is not commonly integrated into the initial teacher education programs in our context, certain schools in Türkiye do use the UbD framework as their primary curriculum and unit design approach for K-12 teaching after training their teachers to effectively use it. Nevertheless, the central gap in the existing knowledge is the lack of understanding regarding how UbD is perceived and implemented by these teachers in the Turkish context of teaching. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the perspectives of teachers and administrators, shedding light on both the benefits and challenges

associated with UbD implementations. Understanding the benefits and challenges of UbD has the potential to drive enhancements in teaching practices and curriculum designs. Besides, if the study shows that the UbD is perceived to be effective in improving teaching EFL, institutions may choose to invest more in training teachers and adopting this framework. Conversely, by identifying the perceived challenges faced during the implementation of UbD, our study may pave the way for solutions and the provisions of support to teachers. Hence, the study addresses the following the research questions:

1. How do English language teachers and English department heads perceive the benefits of unit design with the UbD framework in the Turkish EFL context?
2. What are the challenges they face during its implementation?
3. How do they perceive the applicability of the UbD framework to online education during the pandemic?

## **METHOD**

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach to examine and describe the perceived benefits and challenges of UbD framework use. Qualitative description is “amenable to obtaining straight and largely unadorned (i.e. minimally theorized or otherwise transformed or spun) answers to questions of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers” (p. 337) by means of open-ended individual and/or focus group interviews (Sandelowski, 2000). Hence, the data was collected through open-ended questionnaires from 39 English teachers and five English department heads across K-12 levels from five different schools, and semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with seven teachers who responded to the questionnaire. The data was analyzed through content and thematic analysis.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted in five private schools in Istanbul, all of which had been implementing the UbD framework to design units across all grade levels from K-12. At the time of data collection, four of these schools had been using UbD in all subjects as an official school policy for 6-10 years, while one school had adopted it for just one year. In this particular school, UbD was not an official school policy but served as an unofficial English department policy spanning K-12 levels. However, the primary school English department in that particular school had recently adopted UbD and was in the process of designing a new curriculum based on the framework’s principles. All of these schools recognized UbD as a framework that prioritizes student understanding and integrated it into their educational policies as the foundation of their planning processes. Their mission and vision statements emphasize the preparation of students for 21st-century skills using innovative approaches to teaching and the cultivation of global citizenship as essential elements of their educational philosophy.

The amount of English instruction hours varied among students in different grades across the schools. Primary and middle school students received 6 to 8 hours of English instruction, while high school students received 2 to 14 hours of instruction weekly. Instructors in these schools typically had teaching loads from 20 to 25 hours per week, and classrooms held approximately 20 to 24 students each. Classes predominantly adopted a student-centered approach, fostering a high degree of interaction among students.

The unit design in each school was fundamentally similar. While some schools utilized coursebooks as part of their curriculum, supplemented by readers selected based on topics in the coursebooks, others developed their own units centered around specific themes. Although the design process within each school maintained consistency with the principles of UbD framework, it did vary based on students' English proficiency and the unique English curriculum for each grade level. UbD can be applied to any curriculum or program, as it provides a universal template for all courses. However, content specifics could differ depending on the distinct contexts in which it was implemented. For example, in primary schools, students might focus on learning colors, family members, or animals, whereas high school students might engage in writing persuasive essays. Both levels could design their units following UbD principles, but the content would significantly differ. Each school conducted training sessions on UbD at the start of the academic year and continued to offer these sessions at various intervals throughout the year based on their staff's specific needs.

### Participants

Since the study investigates the perspectives on the use of a specific framework, criterion purposeful sampling was used for the selection of the participants (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Criterion for sample selection was having a considerable knowledge of UbD and experience in unit design based on UbD principles at different grade levels. Thirty-nine English teachers and five heads of English departments whose unit design experience with UbD ranged from one to fifteen years at K-12 volunteered to participate in this study.

As Table 1 shows, 31 (79%) of the teachers were female and eight (20.5%) were male. Twenty (51%) teachers were native speakers of English and 19 (49%) were native speakers of Turkish. Twenty-nine (74%) held their BA degree in ELT and language related areas such as English Language and Literature while the others held BA degrees in different areas such as Psychology. Seventeen participants (43%) had an MA degree in education, 3 (17%) in English language education and English language literature while only one (2%) participant had a Ph.D. degree. Besides, 18 (46%) participants had a teaching certificate from the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) while 19 (48%) had a teaching certificate from other institutions (e.g., CELTA).

**Table 1**

#### *Demographic features of teachers*

|           |         | N= 39 (%) |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
| Gender    | Female  | 31 (79)   |
|           | Male    | 8 (20.5)  |
| L1        | English | 20 (51)   |
|           | Turkish | 19 (49)   |
| Education | BA      | 29 (74)   |
|           | MA      | 17 (43)   |



|                      |       |         |
|----------------------|-------|---------|
|                      | PhD   | 1 (2)   |
| Teaching Certificate | MoNE  | 18 (46) |
|                      | Other | 19 (48) |

Besides, total years of teaching experience of the participating teachers since graduation ranged from two to 29. All teachers had in-service training on unit design in their schools.

Data was also collected from five English department heads, three females and two males, from three of the participating schools. Department heads' total years of teaching experience ranged from nine to 25 years. They also had one to seven years of experience in management at schools where they used UbD. Three of these department heads had master's degrees, while four had a teaching certificate either from MoNE or from other institutions. All the participants had training on unit design and the institutions they worked at provided training for new teachers.

### Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The study was conducted during the pandemic, Spring-Fall 2021, after getting permission from the school administrations and the Ministry of National Education. First, eight schools in which teachers are expected to use UbD framework were contacted and informed about the purpose of the study. Five of these schools granted permission to conduct the study within their context and encouraged their teachers and department heads to participate in our study. Second, to get the approval of the Ministry of Education, the proposal of the study including the data collection instruments was sent to the National Education Directorate in Istanbul. Last, upon the approval of the instruments by the Directorate, the data was collected from those who volunteered to participate in the study.

The data collection process was two-fold. First, two open ended questionnaires, one for teachers and one for department heads, were formed in order to collect their views, based on their experience, on the benefits and challenges of UbD framework use, and the applicability of its principles to design units for online education. The questionnaires included information about the purpose of the study, assurance of privacy, a consent letter, a section to collect demographic information (e.g. gender, education background, teaching experience, and UbD experience) and a section with open-ended questions on the perceived benefits and challenges of UbD implementations (e.g. What is the role of UbD in unit design?, To what extent do you think UbD principles can be applied in your current school context? What are the challenges that you face during the implementation of UbD framework?, How do you think UbD improves your students' English language skills?). Before the actual data collection, the questionnaires were piloted for their wording and clarity with an English teacher who had designed units with UbD in middle and high school settings. Next, due to the Covid-19 pandemic the questionnaires were sent electronically to the participants.

Second, after the administration of the questionnaires, focus group interviews were conducted with seven randomly selected EFL teachers teaching at primary, middle and high school levels at five participating schools to have more insight on the implementation of UbD framework in their context. Two focus groups were formed in a way to involve three and four teachers, and the interviews were scheduled at different times according to the availability of teachers. Group interview was preferred to individual interview, because the group synergy expands the contribution of participants and adds

more depth to the discussions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Besides, interviews enabled participants to elaborate more on their responses on the questionnaire. The interviews were made through Zoom and recorded for the purpose of analysis. Data collection procedure was completed in five months.

The data was analyzed through content and thematic analysis methods (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2011). The former was used to analyze more specific questions (e.g. To what extent have you been able to implement UbD during online education?), while the latter for more general questions (e.g. Please describe your personal experiences and feelings about the implementation of the UbD framework for unit design in your grade level.). After multiple readings of answers, the recurrent organizing themes emerged, which were further reviewed, broken down into smaller units, coded and categorized. The analysis was conducted by two coders independently to ensure that the same meaning was inferred from the same data. A high level of consistency (95% agreement) was achieved between the coders. To achieve the trustworthiness of this study, we applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability criteria. We bolstered credibility through the use of multiple data sources, established confirmability and dependability by involving multiple coders, and enhanced transferability by providing contextual information about the setting of the study.

### **Ethical Principles**

Ethics committee permission for this study was obtained from Yeditepe University Committee of social and humanities ethics committee commission with the decision dated 10.05.2021 and numbered 17/2021.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Benefits of Unit Design with the UbD Framework**

To investigate the role and the perceived benefits of the UbD framework, the participants were asked to elaborate on their experiences in designing units and implementing them at different grade levels. The analysis of their responses revealed 19 categories classified as benefits to students, teachers and language learning as shown in Table 2.

Thirty-three teachers and all the department heads believed that units designed with the UbD framework contributed to their students' overall success. Sixteen teachers said students were more aware of what was expected of them in a specific unit and the purpose of learning. When students understand and know what they must learn, there are no surprises for them in terms of the expected outcomes, which "helps them feel secure and gives them a target that is reachable...and the responsibility to plan their learning process and make up their weaknesses" (Teachers' Questionnaire, T13). Thirteen teachers stated that students were better able to apply their knowledge in different situations by transferring the skills they acquired in these units, because the units emphasized real world skills, which were more meaningful to students. As one teacher explained "What we actually want our students to be able to do in the real world is the starting point of our backward design" (Interview on December 20, 2021, T9). Focus on real world skills also enables students to develop a deeper understanding of big ideas and concepts as verbalized by seven teachers. Besides, teachers also believed UbD increased motivation for learning, and encouraged a reflective and questioning mindset leading to critical thinking as well as autonomous learning as pointed out by one of the department heads.



**Table 2***Benefits of the UbD framework*

|   | Teachers<br>N=39 | Dept. Heads<br>N=5 |
|---|------------------|--------------------|
| Benefits to Students                      | 33               | 5                  |
| Increased awareness of units and outcomes | 16               | 1                  |
| Transferring skills                       | 13               | 2                  |
| Deeper understanding                      | 7                | 2                  |
| Critical thinking                         | 6                | 1                  |
| Increased motivation                      | 5                | -                  |
| Reflective mindset                        | 5                | -                  |
| Being autonomous                          | -                | 1                  |
| Benefits to Teachers                      | 30               | 5                  |
| Being more organized                      | 20               | 3                  |
| Focusing on the outcome first             | 13               | 1                  |
| Focusing on student learning              | 7                | 2                  |
| Clear stage-planning                      | 7                | -                  |
| Monitoring student success                | 5                | 1                  |
| Reflecting regularly                      | -                | 1                  |
| Resource for teachers                     | 1                | -                  |
| Benefits to Language learning             | 28               | -                  |
| Using English for real purposes           | 14               | -                  |
| Meaningful learning                       | 7                | -                  |
| Becoming confident speakers               | 5                | -                  |
| Active use of English                     | 4                | -                  |
| Going beyond technicalities of language   | 3                | -                  |

Table 2 also shows 30 teachers and all of the department heads believed that they benefited from UbD in the planning and organization of their lessons in a variety of ways. Twenty teachers believed they could better organize their teaching procedure with the UbD framework while 13 and seven stated its principles enabled teachers to have focus on the outcome first and on the student learning, respectively. One teacher explains “When teachers are planning lessons, they often focus on activities rather than targets of that lesson. UbD design directs you to focus on your target first and plan your unit accordingly” (Teachers’ Questionnaire, T1). Besides, UbD allowed teachers to monitor student success and served as a beneficial tool with clear stage-planning.

The findings also revealed that 28 of teachers perceived the benefits of the UbD framework as directly related to language learning. Teachers believed that units designed with UbD improved students’ English language skills as they provided meaningful learning experiences beyond the

technicalities of learning a language, which encouraged the active use of English for real purposes. Hence, students became confident speakers. One of the teachers explained:

I think the stages in UbD help English language skills because there is a focus on what students understand and what they are able to do... Essential questions and enduring understandings in UbD push teachers and learners to move beyond the nuts and bolts of language and push students to use their language skills in more realistic settings. (Teachers' Questionnaire, T4)

### Challenges of Unit Design with the UbD Framework

The participants were also inquired about the main difficulties they experienced while designing and implementing units based on the UbD framework. The analysis of their responses revealed institutional, instructional, teacher-related and learner-related challenges shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

#### *Challenges of the UbD framework*

|                                      | Teachers<br>N=39 | Dept. Heads<br>N=5 |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Institutional Challenges             | 13               | 1                  |
| Limited planning time                | 6                | 1                  |
| Limited amount of training           | 4                | -                  |
| Curricular expectations              | 2                | -                  |
| Lack of school policy                | 1                | -                  |
| Teaching load                        | 1                | -                  |
| Instructional Challenges             | 11               | 1                  |
| Designing authentic assessments      | 3                | -                  |
| Confusing stages                     | 3                | -                  |
| Keeping track of purposeful teaching | 3                | 1                  |
| Time taking implementation           | 2                | -                  |
| Learner-Related Challenges           | 8                | -                  |
| Low proficiency                      | 5                | -                  |
| Behaviorally challenging learners    | 2                | -                  |
| Different classroom dynamics         | 1                | 3                  |
| Teacher-Related Challenges           | 5                | 3                  |
| Unwillingness to change              | 2                | -                  |
| Different interpretations of UbD     | 2                | -                  |
| Inexperience with UbD                | 1                | -                  |

Thirteen teachers verbalized a variety of challenges caused by their workplace including limited time for planning, limited amount of training on UbD, institutional expectations regarding the coverage of curriculum, lack of school policy for the implementation of UbD across all levels and subjects, and their teaching load. They mostly complained about the fact that most of the time they did not have enough time to spend on UbD planning. As one of the teachers explained "lack of time

and having lots of hours and grade levels to teach make it difficult to think about the lesson plan and design it thoroughly” (Teachers’ Questionnaire, T15). Teachers also believed that the effective implementation of UbD requires on-going in-service training and a school-wide policy promoting the use of UbD. This is because designing units based on its principles becomes a significant challenge when colleagues lack a comprehensive understanding of what UbD entails and how it should be implemented.

Eleven teachers experienced some challenges classified as instructional, which included difficulties in designing authentic assessment tasks, keeping track of purposeful teaching by aligning tasks with standards, following the UbD steps, and implementing the framework in limited time. Table 3 also shows, teachers faced some problems caused by students and teachers. The former included students’ low level of proficiency in English, having behaviorally challenging students who are unwilling to participate in activities, and different classroom dynamics. During the interviews, one of the teachers (T4) indicated that it was easier to implement UbD with older and more proficient learners. Teacher-related difficulties, however, stemmed from teachers’ resistance to change, the variety in their interpretations of UbD principles and their inexperience in UbD in general. A department head stated: “Some teachers are unsure how to implement the use of enduring questions and understandings. Their attitude seems to be, “Well, I have my own way and it's close enough.” (Department Heads Questionnaire, DH5). This participant further commented that teachers did not always take time to understand and welcome innovative ideas like UbD because they took any attempt to better their practice as an “assumption that they are bad teachers”.

### **The UbD Framework in Online Education**

Since the data of the study was collected when the education at all levels was unprecedentedly transferred to the online platforms during the pandemic, the participants were also asked to evaluate the applicability of the UbD principles for distance education. Thirteen teachers and all department heads stated that they were fully able to apply UbD during online education while 11 teachers said they could partially implement it. One of the department heads explained “It is still education at the end of the day and the UbD is a framework that can be adjusted in any kind of teaching and learning” (Department Heads’ Questionnaire, DH4).

Nine teachers mentioned that technology, especially web 2.0 tools that allowed students to write comments on their friends’ ideas, facilitated the use of UbD in online education by making the process of learning more fun, attention-grabbing, and motivating for students, and the process of monitoring student learning more feasible for teachers. Teachers found the UbD principles easy to adapt to online activities but not to the implementation of larger projects (e.g. G.R.A.S.P.S). Besides, one of the teachers also admitted that during the mandatory online education they had more time to work on planning better units with UbD.

On the other hand, nine teachers confirmed that they were not able to adapt UbD at all to online education, which was a new learning curve for everyone. The main difficulty they encountered involved the online assessment of students based on the UbD principles in a reliable and consistent way. One teacher stated “It's been much, much harder. Determining the validity and reliability of an assessment is always difficult when students can cheat and there is less oversight on performance” (Teachers’ Questionnaire, T28). Another teacher complained about the exam time being shortened as required by the Ministry of National Education during the pandemic, which made it even more difficult to assess student learning properly because, “a real-world skill cannot

be assessed within a forty-minute exam” (interview with T9). Besides, although they conventionally used essays for summative assessment, one of the high school teachers said “as the exams were no longer seventy minutes, we had to find a whole new type of assessment (to replace essay writing). We did multiple choice exams in English, which we never do. It was not really authentic, it was fake” (interview with T25). In addition to the lack of proper summative assessment, the nature of online education prevented spontaneous conversations and collaboration among students, which meant “students are not able to practice and use the skills they have as much as they could in a classroom” (Teachers’ Questionnaire, T4). Hence, whether the course objectives regarding the language skills were achieved or not remained unknown to teachers.

Teachers also verbalized the lack of interaction among students, lack of motivation, discipline problems and some technological problems like unstable internet connection as the main obstacles for successful implementation of UbD units in online education. They stated that no matter how good the unit design was, it had no meaning at all when the students had no access to them due to poor internet connection.

## DISCUSSION

The teachers’ and department heads’ responses revealed findings that concurred with some of the findings of the previously conducted studies. Most of the participants believed that implementing UbD had a positive impact on students’ general academic achievement (Brown, 2004, Gloria et al., 2019; Noble, 2011; Özyurt et al., 2021; Uluçınar, 2021; Yurtseven et al., 2013), because they developed deeper understanding of the content (Gloria et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2017; Uluçınar, 2021), better transferred the knowledge into real life situations (Burson, 2011; Florian & Zimmerman, 2015) and had elevated levels of motivation (Burson, 2011; Uluçınar, 2021; Yurtseven et al., 2013). Most participants also expressed that UbD contributed to students’ English language achievement by improving their speaking and writing skills (Bolivar & Rodriguez, 2017; Hosseini, 2019), boosting motivation for language learning and allowing their active participation (Yurtseven & Altun, 2017).

The study revealed that teachers also enhanced their professional performance as they implemented UbD in their classes. This finding is consistent with the results of the recent studies in which teachers developed more positive attitudes towards themselves and the utilization of UbD (Anwaruddin, 2013; Boozer, 2014; Graff, 2011; Gulsvig, 2009). Participants in the current study perceived themselves as more organized during the implementation process as in Yurtseven and Doğan (2018), and more motivated as in Boozer (2014) as they were able to see the purpose of their teaching (Johnson et al., 2017; Kelting-Gibson, 2005) due to their initial focus on desired outcomes and student learning.

On the other hand, teachers’ and department heads’ experiences with UbD affirmed multiple institutional challenges which were also encountered in other contexts. These challenges include constraints related to time (Anwaruddin, 2013; Uluçınar, 2021; Yurtseven & Altun, 2017), a lack of training (Yurtseven et al., 2013) administrative expectations (McTighe, 2016), the absence of school policy (Uluçınar, 2021; Yurtseven et al., 2013) and heavy workloads (Yurtseven & Altun, 2017; Uluçınar, 2021). Besides, the participants experienced some instructional challenges akin to those observed in Uluçınar’s study (2021) regarding the design of authentic assessments, and in Johnson et al.’s study (2017) regarding the management of purposeful teaching and concerns about timely content coverage. Teachers who were hesitant to use UbD in their classes expressed concerns about the need

to cover content within specified timeframes. They also found differentiation and adhering to the stages of the framework during the UbD design process to be challenging.

Furthermore, many participants stated that having students with varying levels of English proficiency, behavioral challenges and diverse classroom dynamics made it difficult to implement UbD in their classes. These findings appear inconsistent with Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) argument that UbD allows each student to reach their potential and improve their skills, as the framework emphasizes each student individually. However, it is worth noting that the framework can be adapted to meet the unique needs of classrooms with different dynamics and varying English proficiency levels.

The study also uncovered challenges that stemmed from the teachers themselves such as their reluctance to embrace innovative methods and lack of experience in UbD design, which aligns with findings in Uluçınar's study (2021). To avoid this difficulty, McTighe (2016) suggests that teachers should be encouraged to work as a team and UbD should be owned by every member of the school in order for it to work efficiently.

As for the implementation of UbD during distance education, although some of the participants believed that UbD was a framework applicable in every platform, some were partially able to apply it by skipping some steps in the framework such as ensuring the assessments were reliable. There were also teachers who could not apply it at all as it was something new and they did not have a chance to focus on it as their concern was mainly getting through the lessons ensuring students were motivated enough to attend the lessons during the online education.

## Conclusion

The present study investigated the perspectives of EFL teachers and department heads tasked to design and implement language teaching units through the UbD framework across all grade levels including online education within the context of their schools. Exploring the experiences and insights of educators actively using UbD was deemed valuable for uncovering the potential benefits and challenges associated with this framework. In this regard this research sought to bridge a significant gap, particularly considering that the adoption of UbD remains limited not only within the Turkish EFL context but also in various educational settings and disciplines.

Given that the participants of the present study expressed more benefits than challenges regarding its application in their context, the insights obtained from active users of UbD can serve as encouragement for other private schools with similar settings and visions in Turkish EFL context to adopt UbD in their course and unit design. These schools should consider contemplating a greater investment in UbD by first training their teachers and then encouraging their efforts to implement its principles so that their students are equipped with the necessary skills to address real-world challenges, develop deeper understandings, and establish meaningful connections through transfer. Furthermore, although this study was conducted in private school settings, the perceived benefits and effectiveness of this framework can also contribute to the English curriculum in public schools. While the restricted number of hours allocated for EFL instruction in public schools remains as the main obstacle for effective language teaching, UbD framework, known for its adaptability to different educational contexts and its capacity to accommodate rich content provided by teachers, can help public schools realign their existing curriculum with UbD principles to emphasize understanding and transfer as the core focus of the curriculum. However, to successfully implement UbD, it is imperative for both administrators and teachers to recognize the necessity for change and maintain an open-minded approach to innovation. In fact, irrespective of whether it is a public or private school, a top-

down change in the program, without teachers internalizing the need for it, will likely be executed reluctantly driven by a sense of obligation, and may not yield success. Therefore, teachers should be educated about UbD as an innovative approach to unit design either by a team of education experts in UbD or as part of their initial teacher education programs, and be offered ongoing trainings and mentoring, and institutional support to reach necessary resources and templates.

Besides, recognizing the potential difficulties, as highlighted in this study, can be helpful for schools to take precautions and plan teaching practices accordingly. For example, given that the UbD process may be time-consuming, schools should develop comprehensive plans for the entire academic year; provide their staff, especially newcomers, with continuous in-service trainings across the year to foster a shared understanding of how UbD principles are implemented. Additionally, schools should refrain from exerting undue pressure on teachers to cover content within strict timeframes, allowing students' learning with UbD to take precedence.

However, the study has some limitations. Since the number of schools in Türkiye where UbD was officially implemented was limited, the study was conducted with a restricted number of participants, particularly department heads. While the number of schools currently implementing UbD may be limited, there exist other institutions where UbD could potentially be used. It is essential for future studies to include these diverse school settings, as the experiences of teachers within their unique contexts may yield distinct results, thus making a valuable contribution to the UbD literature. Another limitation is that the global Covid-19 pandemic prevented face-to-face classroom observations, which could have provided insights into teachers' interactions with students based on the UbD framework. Future research should involve classroom observations and interviews with both teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of UbD principles. Besides, experimental studies conducted with students may reveal whether the UbD process indeed impacts students' academic achievement and English language skills. Finally, a broader study could encompass the implementation of UbD in various subjects within Turkish schools.

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## Appendix A

### A sample unit plan designed with UbD

| General Information |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Unit:               | Welcome To School |
| Grade Level:        | Grade 1           |
| Duration:           | 6 weeks           |

| Stage 1: Desired Results   |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>Established Goals</b></p> <p><b>Listening:</b><br/>                     1Lm.01. Understand, with support, the main point of short talk.<br/>                     1Ld.01. Recognise a limited range of simple words that are spelled out slowly and clearly.<br/>                     1Ld.02. Understand, with support, a limited range of short, simple instructions.</p> <p><b>Speaking:</b><br/>                     1Sc.01. Give basic information about themselves using simple words and phrases.<br/>                     1Sc.05. Produce short, isolated, rehearsed phrases using gestures and signaled requests for help when necessary.<br/>                     1Sc.06. Use a limited range of simple grammatical structures, allowing for frequent, basic mistakes.</p> <p><b>Reading:</b><br/>                     1Rd.01. Recognise, identify, sound and name the letters of the alphabet.<br/>                     1Rd.03. Understand, with support, simple words and phrases in short, simple, illustrated texts.<br/>                     1Rd.04. Begin to deduce the meaning of a limited range of simple, familiar words, with support, by linking them to pictures.</p> | <i>Transfer</i>  |   |
|  | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Students will be able to independently use their learning to...</i></p> <p>T1. apply their organizational skills and community habits to different contexts, such as home or social settings to contribute to a safe, respectful, and positive environment.</p>  |   |
|  | <i>Making Meaning</i>  |   |
|  | <p><b>Enduring Understandings:</b></p> <p>EU1. Following school and class rules helps create a safe, respectful and positive community that supports everyone’s learning.</p> <p>EU2. The organization of our school and classroom environment helps us learn better.</p> <p>EU3. The use of different tools and resources in our classroom to organize ourselves impacts our learning.</p> <p>EU4. Kind, respectful and positive relationships within a classroom have a positive impact in our learning.</p> | <p><b>Essential Questions:</b></p> <p>EQ1. Do we have rules in our school and classroom? Why? How do they help us?</p> <p>EQ2. What would it be like to live in a world with no rules or organization? Would it be ok if everyone did whatever they felt like doing anytime they wanted?</p> <p>EQ3. How does our school help us learn?</p> <p>EQ4. What are some ways to help us organize ourselves in our classroom to learn better?</p> <p>EQ5. Does our relationship with friends affect our learning? How?</p> |
|  | <i>Acquisition</i>   |   |
| <p><b>Students will know:</b></p> <p>K1. classroom objects; a table, desk, ruler, eraser, pencil case, school bag, computer, whiteboard, chairs, crayons, color pencils, books, notebooks</p>  | <p><b>Students will be able to:</b></p> <p>S1. recognize and identify classroom objects, school activities, and school spaces by matching the audio to the pictures, also in a story book.</p>   |   |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Writing<br/>1Wca.01. Write letters and words in a straight line from left to right.<br/>1Wca04. Write familiar words.</p> <p>Use of English<br/>1Ug.02. Use common present simple forms to give basic personal and factual information.<br/>1Ug.05. Use common adjectives, including colours, to say what someone/something is or has.<br/>1Uv.01. Use cardinal numbers 1–20.<br/>1Uv.07. Use common singular nouns, plural nouns [plural 's'] and proper nouns to say what things are.</p> | <p>K2. classroom rules and expectations; listening to the teacher and others, raising their hand to speak, taking turns, using polite language, showing respect for others, sharing materials, taking turns, asking questions, and offering help and encouragement.</p> <p>K3. school activities; read, write, use computers, do math, sing, draw, play, have breakfast and lunch</p> <p>K4. school spaces</p>   | <p>S2. identify and follow classroom rules and meet classroom expectations.</p> <p>S3. count and recognize numbers 1-20, and use them to identify objects.</p> <p>S4. describe an object by its colour.</p> <p>S5. describe their daily activities (both at/outside of school, classroom rules and routines, using present simple tense.</p> |
| <b>Stage 2: Assessment Evidence</b>  |  |  |
| <b>Success Criteria</b>  | <b>Evaluation Evidence</b>   |  |
| <p>The booklet should include:</p> <p>1) a classroom rules chart with pictures representing each item</p> <p>2) a visual schedule for the week which activities will happen when and where</p> <p>3) a school map on which different school spaces are located (e.g. bathroom, playground, library)</p>  | <p>Performance Task:</p> <p>Welcome to Our School, Froggy!</p> <p>G: to make their new friend feel welcome to school<br/>R: students<br/>A: the newcomer<br/>S: Your teacher announced that there will be a newcomer to your classroom and assigned you as a mentor to help them. The newcomer does not know anything about your school and classroom, so they need to be introduced to the classroom and school community. Your job is to create a welcome booklet with information about class rules and expectations, school spaces and routines. Once you've created your booklet, you will present it to the newcomer and elaborate on each item.</p> <p>P: a welcoming booklet<br/>S: clarity, visual appeal, presentation, neatness</p> |  |
|  | <p>Other Evidence:</p> <p>The type and content of the evidence will change according to the flow of the unit. Teachers can assess the items in the knowledge and skills sections through;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● informal checks for understanding such as dialogues and think-aloud,</li> <li>● observation,</li> </ul>   |  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● multiple choice, matching, true-false or short-answer format quizzes,</li> <li>● a combination of mix methods mentioned above.</li> </ul>   |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Stage 3: Learning Plan</b></p>   |  |
| <p>Pre-Assessment<br/> <i>Diagnostic test for literacy, colours, numbers</i><br/> <i>KWL chart for class rules and expectations</i></p>  |  |
| <p>Learning Activities:</p> <p>Orientation-Getting to know each other, ice-breaker games, diagnostic tests</p> <p>Introduction to the big idea and discussing the performance task through essential questions: Why do we come to school? How does our school help us learn? Why do we use certain classroom objects, how do they help us?</p> <p>Present the classroom objects with slides focusing on singular and plural nouns. For each picture ask: “How does this thing help us learn?” Froggy can say silly and wrong things such as: a pencil case helps me eat my lunch. Have students correct Froggy. Repeat this with each classroom object.</p> <p>School Bag Craft</p> <p>Classroom objects worksheet</p> <p>Classroom hunt on school objects (pair-work): students walk around the classroom and collect classroom objects in pairs. Then they present what they find to another pair.</p> <p>Story Time: the reading activity is followed by a kind of story report activity such as story jotter, book report, etc.</p> <p>Assessment on classroom objects</p> <p>Introduction to class rules and routines; role-play with Froggy: students will be familiar with school routines, rules, responsibilities and how these help us be organized at school and learn better. During this time, introduce the rules and expectations for their classroom, pair and group work, as well.</p> <p>After the role-play (Froggy doesn’t know any rules), ask students how we can help Froggy, then introduce the set of rules with pictures by focusing on kindness specifically. Students might have different understandings of the rules so do modeling with Froggy for each rule.</p> <p>Classroom rules colouring: have students colour the pictures for each rule and tell what each picture represents to their pairs.</p> <p>“How Would You Feel If ... ” Cards (integration of Social Emotional Learning): Go back to the “Be kind” rule in the set of the rules and have a discussion with students. Use ‘how would you feel if...’ cards to have students empathize with some situations and emphasize how to be always kind no matter what happens.</p> | <p>Progress Tracking:</p> <p>Review assessments to check for comprehension and address misunderstandings.</p> <p>Provide additional support or clarification as needed.</p> <p>Monitor progress on performance tasks throughout the lessons.</p> |

Create a kindness jar: Discuss how we can be kind to each other.  
Have students draw random acts of kindness on a piece of paper and collect them in a jar for each group. Pick a card from the kindness jar every day and practice it together with the class until they internalize them.

Story Time: This reading activity is followed by a kind of story report activity such as story jotter, book report, etc.)

Assessment on Class Rules

Introduction to school spaces; brainstorm: students will be learning about the different areas and spaces in their school. This discussion can include places like the classroom, library, playground, cafeteria, sports hall, and other relevant spaces in their school. Revise classroom rules with the pictures, do modeling again. Reinforce positive behaviour. "Can we do whatever we want wherever we want in our school? For example, can I eat my lunch in the class? etc." Elicit answers from students. This activity will help students gain an understanding of the different areas in their school and how each space serves a specific purpose.

What spaces do we have in our school? Introduce school spaces with pictures. E.g. This is our library. We can read there or borrow books from the librarian. The librarian helps us with borrowing books.

School tour: Take students on a tour around the school and visit different spaces such as the library, cafeteria, playground, etc. Discuss the purpose of each space and how they are organized. Make sure to remind students of the expected behaviour while doing this.

School Spaces; pair work: students choose a space, draw it and present what we do in that space: e.g. We read books in the library.

Story time: This reading activity is followed by a kind of story report activity such as story jotter, book report, etc.

Assessment on School Spaces  
Performance Tasks, Conclusion, Reflection  
Discuss the performance task and have students work on it throughout the lessons. Show an example first.  
Unit reflection sheet or exit card on desired results



### **Author Contributions**

All authors contributed equally to the manuscript.

### **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author.

### **Supporting Individuals or Organizations**

No grants were received from any public, private or non-profit organizations for this research.

### **Ethical Approval and Participant Consent**

Ethics committee permission for this study was obtained from Yeditepe University Committee of social and humanities ethics committee commission with the decision dated 10.05.2021 and numbered 17/2021.

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### **Availability of Data and Materials**

Not applicable.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study is part of an MA thesis conducted under the supervision of Dr. Eveyik Aydın and submitted to the Graduate School of Educational Sciences at Yeditepe University.