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Teaching how to write instructional objectives to pre-service language teachers through the ABCD Model

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Abstract: This paper presents the use of the ABCD model as a way to train teachers of English to write clear and specific objectives. It is stated here that most of the instructional objectives written by pre-service teachers are inadequately formulated. With this in mind, pre-service teachers (n=46) were trained in writing instructional objectives through integrating the ABCD Model in the syllabus of Teaching Language Skills I. During micro-teaching sessions required in this course, the participants designed lesson plans which included objectives based on this model. The findings suggested that the model helped the participants to write clear objectives and to design activities accordingly, which is quite necessary in their future career.

1. Introduction

Instructional plans play an important role in what teachers and students are expected to do in the classroom. Therefore, it is vital for educators to write down their instructional objectives before designing these activities. Writing goals and objectives is the very first stage of a lesson plan which specifies activities, procedures and problems. However, although goals and objectives are of equal importance,

instructional objectives require special care, as goals are “broad and general statements of desired educational outcomes”, while instructional objectives “specify observable and measurable student behavior” (Snowman, McCown, Biehler 2012: 441). In other words, “[o]bjectives describe the desired behaviors that learners will exhibit, or will be able to exhibit, after the learning situation. Objectives are statements of desired, observable, teachable, learnable behaviors that are evidence of learning” (Ferguson 1998: 87). Instructional objectives require teachers to undertake certain steps. Among them is planning lesson time, choosing appropriate teaching strategies and materials, deciding about learning outcomes and specifying the areas/topics in which students might have difficulties. Instructional objectives also highlight the assessment procedures conducted by teachers. Thus, writing clear and specific objectives becomes an indispensable part of any instructional design, for it acts as a guide for both teachers and students. It helps educators in appropriate planning and learners in achieving the expected outcomes (Haynes 2010; Horwitz 2013; Stones, 2012; Woodward 2001).

In order to write effective and useful objectives, the teacher needs to determine what learners are expected to do. Vague statements or inability to present specific outcomes constrain teachers in the implementation of suitable teaching strategies and materials. Let us consider two objectives taken from a lesson plan prepared by a pre-service Turkish teacher of English for the School Practicum:

- 1) By the end of the lesson, students will become skilled listeners and improve their pronunciation.
- 2) Students will improve their reading through comprehension questions.

When we consider the first statement, it is clear that although the student aimed to write an objective, it might actually be characterized as an example of a goal. This statement does not prove to be a useful guideline for the teacher in planning the techniques and activities accordingly, as there is no clear explanation of “better listeners” or what exactly is meant by “skilled”. It is also not clear how students will be able to improve their pronunciation. Similarly, the second statement fails to state clearly what is expected of learners. After reading this

statement, one may assume only that students will deal with a reading passage or similar material and will answer comprehension questions. These two statements can be said to violate the basic principles of instructional objectives: being clear and specific.

Contrary to the above statements, the next two examples of instructional objectives clearly specify student behavior (Snowman, McCown, Biehler 2012: 446):

- 1) Given eight descriptions of instructional lessons, two at each of Piaget's four stages, the student will be able to explain in each case why the lesson would or would not succeed.
- 2) Given a list of Piaget's four stages of cognitive development, within twenty minutes, the student will describe in his or her own words two problems that he/she at each stage should or should not be able to solve.

These two objectives clearly indicate what students are expected to do and what behaviors they need to show.

2. The need for the current study

The pre-service Turkish teachers of English enrolled at the departments of Foreign Language Education in Turkey are required to undergo teaching practice during the last semester of their university education. The practice is intended to consolidate their skills in teaching English as a foreign language at various levels of education. During the practice, they are required to conduct classes under staff and mentor supervision and to prepare lesson plans. Therefore, it is vital for these teachers to determine objectives and design the activities accordingly. After an analysis of lesson plans prepared by the pre-service teachers of English (50 lesson plans and 200 instructional objectives), it was observed that most of the instructional objectives written in these plans lacked the conditions under which the behavior was expected to occur and the criterion/criteria of acceptable performance. Moreover, there seemed to be a mismatch between the activities and objectives. In other words, it was not clear which

activities aimed to realize which objectives. Below are several of the objectives taken from these lesson plans:

- At the end of the lesson, students will develop their knowledge of directions.
- The students will be able to improve their speaking.
- The students, at the end of the lesson, will be able to learn some lexical items.

Since it was observed that most pre-service language teachers could not write clear and specific objectives, and the objectives written by them did not match the activities, the current study aimed to help them to formulate objectives properly through the ABCD Model.

3. Writing objectives and the ABCD Model

There are several steps of ensuring that objectives to be written in a lesson plan are clear and specific enough. Ferguson (1998: 92-93) enumerates six of them:

- 1) Identify the goals of learning;
- 2) Break these goals into component learning outcomes;
- 3) Identify current learner competencies;
- 4) Determine the outcomes that need to be sought in learning sessions;
- 5) Write learner-centered objectives for attainment of goals;
- 6) Arrange learning objectives in reasonable teaching sessions.

These steps allow teachers to analyze students' needs and to focus on what students will attain at the end of the lesson. During the training session, apart from these steps in writing objectives, the participants were introduced to the ABCD Model (Instructional Development Institute [IDI], 1974), which is one of the simplest but most effective

models that can be used to ensure formulation of clear and specific objectives. This model consists of four components, namely:

- Audience;
- Behavior;
- Condition;
- Degree.

Audience refers to the individuals for whom objective(s) are intended. They can be primary school children, high school students, in-service teachers, etc. *Behavior* refers to the actions or abilities that the audience shows. *Condition* is related to the conditions under which the *Audience* is expected to show the *Behavior*. Finally, *Degree* refers to the accuracy or standard to be demonstrated by the *Audience*. Here are the objectives which are based on the ABCD Model:

- Given sentences in the active voice (C), the students (A) will rewrite these sentences in the passive voice (B) with no errors or tense contradictions (D).
- The students (A) will write a paragraph on what they did during their summer holiday (B) using the simple past tense (C) with no errors in terms of the past tense (D).
- Listening to a recording about pollution and its harmful effects on the environment (C), the students (A) will answer the questions (B), providing at least 7 correct answers (D).
- Given a text on how to overcome text anxiety (C), the students (A) will identify the key solutions to text anxiety (B) with no errors (D).

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 45 junior in-service English language teachers enrolled in an English language teaching department in Turkey. They were aged between 20 and 21 and selected by using purposive sampling. Age and sex were not taken into consideration.

4.2. Procedures

During the winter semester of the academic year 2013/2014, writing instructional objectives was included in the syllabus of Teaching Language Skills I. It was included with the aim of providing the participants with a variety of ways to teach vocabulary, listening, speaking and pronunciation, and of reinforcing and practicing with them the topics and strategies covered during the lectures. As a requirement, the participants did one-hour microteaching in groups of five in the areas and skills covered in the course. At the beginning of the semester, a questionnaire form (see Appendix) was distributed to the participants. The form helped to determine the current knowledge of participants on the subject of objectives.

The participants were trained in writing instructional objectives through the ABCD Model for two weeks. During the training, which included both lectures and materials compiled from several articles, the participants were provided with clear guidelines on how to match the objectives with the activities.

The instructional objectives written by the participants for the micro teaching activities at the end of the semester were subject to content analysis based on the ABCD Model and it was determined to what extent the objectives matched the activities.

As a final evaluation, semi-structured and face-to face interviews were conducted with randomly selected ten participants. The interviews were held individually as it was believed that they would provide more information on participants' perspectives and experiences.

5. Results and discussion

The instructional objectives written by the participants at the end of the semester were both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the objectives.

Model	Objective conforming		Objective not conforming	
	f.	%	f.	%
A	40	100	0	0
B	40	100	0	0
C	40	100	0	0
D	37	92.5	3	7.5
Objective	match		Activity no match	
	f.	%	f.	%
40	32	80	8	20

As a result of the analysis conducted on the instructional objectives (40 objectives in total) written by the participants, it was found that almost all of them were in line with the ABCD model, with only three failing to respond to the Degree component of the model. The Degree component proves vital since it indicates the criteria used to decide whether the performance is conducted as expected and acts as a guideline for further assessment of the learning outcomes. The components of the model are inseparable, that is, one is incomplete without the others.

The analysis also helped to determine whether the activities mirrored the objectives presented in lesson plans. The gathered evidence indicates that eight of the objectives were not fully realized in the activities, which might be attributed to the fact that some of the participants first designed the activities and then formulated the instructional objectives, as one of the participants explained:

First, we determined the language structure or function to teach our students, designed the activities, and then wrote the objectives. We focused on what we would do but we first focused on the activity.

Another participant confirmed what the previous participant explained by saying that:

As a group, we got together for several times in order to try to develop ideas and to think of ways on teaching our students what would do during the lesson. Then we brainstormed several activities and strategies that we could use while teaching our students how to use the words in context. We did not write the objectives in advance. We first created the activities and then wrote the objectives.

The responses provided by the participants during the interviews also indicated that the ABCD model enabled them to write clear objectives and that the Degree component was the most challenging one. This component required from the participants specification of the criterion that would be used to determine whether the expected behavior was realized. One of the participants explained this difficulty in the following way:

Actually, we had no problems while writing the Behavior and Condition components. We determined what our students would be able to do and under which condition. However, when it came to the Degree part, we spent a great amount of time. It was difficult for us.

Another participant stressed the same by saying:

The Degree component was challenging for us. For instance, we created a lesson plan on teaching grammar inductively, focusing on the simple past tense. We had hot discussions on the Degree components of our objectives. The discussions were on what would be the satisfying responses to the given questions on the exercises so that we could be sure that our students attained the learning outcomes.

Moreover, the participants pointed to the importance of showing clearly how the objectives matched the activities. One of the participants stated that:

During the training sessions on how to write objectives, we were asked to write a statement under each activity that would clearly indicate which objective was realized. I think it helped group members design the activities accordingly. I mean this kept us from writing activities without objectives or vice versa.

The interview sessions also revealed that some participants had the misconception that writing objectives was only required for teachers who, thanks to it, can guide their activities and plan their time during the class. When the participants were asked the question about whether they should explain the objectives to their students, some provided similar responses to the following one:

I thought that writing objectives was just to let the teachers know what they were going to do in the classroom and plan them accordingly. I did not know or was not aware that objectives should also be shared with my students.

The interview sessions held with some of the participants indicated that the training provided to them proved useful and helped them to write clear and specific objectives. Moreover, the participants found the Degree component of the ABCD Model the most challenging but informative.

6. Conclusions and implications for practice

Considering the findings of the study, it can be stated that pre-service teachers need to be trained in writing clear objectives. In this training an essential role should be assigned to the model discussed in this paper (the ABCD Model). Armed with the model on objectives, pre-service language teachers can be in a much better position and can write clear and specific objectives that are relevant and of help to both

them as well as their future students. In order to encourage learners to match the objectives with the suitable activities, lesson plans should include a separate section/column clearly indicating how the objective is realized.

Considering the results of this study and the relevant literature on writing objectives, the following implications can be suggested:

- 1) Pre-service language teachers as well as other teachers should be provided with training on how to write clear and specific objectives through a simple but informative model such as the ABCD Model.
- 2) The training may be conducted before one is enrolled in classes in teaching language skills, or in a practicum (internship) at a school.
- 3) During the training, in-service language teachers should be informed about the need to make students aware of the objectives so that they can work best. At the very beginning of the lesson it is very vital to tell students what is expected of them to accomplish and why it is important to learn.
- 4) There are various formats for lesson plans available on the Internet as well as in some course books (see, for example, Harmer 2007: 364-378, Purgason 2014: 371-372). Most of them suggest similar components; however, they fail to provide a section showing which objective is realized through which activity. Therefore, no matter which lesson plan format is used, the lesson plan should include a column that will indicate the objective and the activity that matches this objective.

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Appendix

Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible. If you do not have an answer to any question, feel free to skip it. Your answers will provide a clear picture of what you know on the given questions. This will also help your lecturer plan and design his lectures based on the weaknesses and strengths determined in the answers. You do not have to provide your name on this form, and all the answers will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you for taking the time to complete this form.

- 1) "Goals" in education refer to
- 2) "Objectives" refer to
- 3) Lesson plans should include objectives since.....

4) Objectives should be written before / after determining the activities because

5) Objectives include several components such as

6) Please use the following space to express your views/opinions on the use of objectives and goals

There are various factors for which plans are available in the literature as well as in different countries. For example, Harmer (2007: 364-368), Parry (2004: 104-117), Mostafa (2007) suggest similar components. However, they fail to provide a list of the underlying objectives. Therefore, it is suggested to add a list of objectives to the existing literature. This list can be used as a guide for teachers to design their lesson plans. The list of objectives can be used as a guide for teachers to design their lesson plans. The list of objectives can be used as a guide for teachers to design their lesson plans.