

# Building Background: What It Takes to Really Make a Lesson Connect with Students

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## Abstract/Resumen

Seeking the best pedagogical practices for bilingual higher education and guided by the principles of the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP), we describe a sub-study of the Sheltered Instruction Research Project (SIRP) which deals with how professors at ÚNICA college in Bogotá, Colombia implement one of the components of the model: *building background* (BB). This SIOP element involves the connection of prior learning and experiences with the new content material instructors teach. Such connections allow for students to gain better understandings by recalling facts and concepts from previously studied topics. The sources of data used to fulfill the purposes of this 30-day sub-study included class observations, a workshop and a questionnaire. The research explores the usage of direct experiences and childhood memories as the most effective means for uniting a topic with student feelings, age, needs, preferences and realities.

En busca de las mejores prácticas en la educación superior y guiados por el modelo pedagógico protocolo de la observación de la instrucción protegida (SIOP), se desarrolló el proyecto investigativo de la Instrucción Protegida (SIRP) el cual describe la manera en la que los profesores de la ÚNICA, universidad localizada en Bogotá, Colombia, implementan uno

de los componentes de este modelo: la construcción del conocimiento previo (BB). Este hace referencia a la conexión de aprendizajes adquiridos y experiencias pasadas que hacen los estudiantes con el nuevo contenido; tales conexiones les permiten tener una mejor comprensión recordando hechos o ideas acerca de cierto tema. Las fuentes de información usadas para alcanzar los objetivos de este estudio de 30 días fueron observaciones de clases, un cuestionario y un taller. La investigación explora el uso de experiencias directas y recuerdos de la infancia como los medios más efectivos para conectar un tema con los sentimientos, la edad, las necesidades, las preferencias y las vivencias de los estudiantes.

*Keywords/Palabras claves:* building background, direct experiences, childhood memories, recall; construcción del conocimiento previo, experiencias directas, memorias de la niñez, memoria

### Introduction

Studies carried out on various contemporary educational methodologies have established that classroom teaching should take into account the reality of student's lives: their ages, preferences and needs. In other words, lesson content, classroom environments and teaching techniques should "fit" with students. To use an old adage: Teachers should be able to put themselves into their students' shoes.

Different pedagogical theorists have made reference to the principles of BB, but in different terms. For example, Ausubel (in Shapiro, 2004) states that the foundation for learning is the incorporation of new knowledge into prior knowledge. He has named this the *assimilation theory*. He posits that learners have certain pre-established cognitive structures, and that these are available for the assimilation of new material. A key to teaching is recognizing so that the existing structures can be activated during different parts of the learning process. Also, Barlett in Cook (1997) expounded upon the importance of prior knowledge in the acquisition of new. His *schema theory* explains how learners' collective experiences assist them in retaining mental representations.

Around the world, especially in many United States (US) English as a second language (ESL) programs, BB approaches are already being applied. One such model which uses BB theories is the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP). This model was designed in order to enable English second language learners (ESLLs) to be successful in content classes and to develop strong second language skills. By connecting student past experiences with new knowledge, information becomes comprehensible for ESLLs. Currently, in Colombia, a handful of professors and some students from the *Institución Universitaria Colombo*

*Americana* (ÚNICA)<sup>1</sup> are conducting research on the applicability of this model in a higher education context. Due to the bilingual vision which guides the school, its faculty began the Sheltered Instruction Research Project (SIRP) in 2007, led by the college's academic dean, Dr. Barbara Noel. As of the time of the writing of this article, the research on the first component, *lesson preparation*, had been completed. The participants have already been able to see how the application of SIOP lesson preparation principles motivates teachers to work hard at designing and structuring effective lesson plans which utilize appropriate materials and activities in order to encourage students.

The second of the 8 sub-studies in the SIRP is BB. This aspect of the SIOP framework offers guidelines for teachers so that they may make a connection between their students' past learning/past experiences and the new content being taught. Building background becomes a helpful pedagogical tool to make student learning processes more relevant. If applied by the teacher, students will be able to connect what they have already experienced with the new knowledge. What follows are researcher observations and analysis of how professors at ÚNICA implement the BB elements in their classes.

### Context

The goal of incorporating the BB element in classes at ÚNICA is to use the student knowledge and personal worldview (already mentally constructed) to provide a basis for understanding, learning, and remembering facts and ideas (McNeil in Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004). In order to carry out this sub-study on the BB component, the researchers observed three content classes delivered in English. The purpose of the presence of researchers within the classroom was to investigate precisely *how* three different professors built background and included the elements that make up the BB component. The professors under observation voluntarily offered their participation. The students were from the fourth, seventh and eighth semester groups of the Bilingual Education undergraduate program offered at ÚNICA. The application of the SIOP model fits with the nature of the college's curriculum since it was originally designed to assist ESLs become English teachers.

The sub-study followed a traditional 7-step research process which included the following: an area of focus statement, a research question, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, findings, an action plan, and final thoughts.

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<sup>1</sup> ÚNICA is a teacher's college in Bogotá, the capital city of the Republic of Colombia. Its Education Department grants English teacher certification to graduates.

In the investigative process, professor researchers identified weaknesses and strengths while supplementing BB principles into their work. In the course of the research, they were active participants, doing peer and self-assessment on their pedagogical style. Additionally, the faculty involved in the SIRP joined a workshop in which they reviewed and shared their doubts, thoughts and suggestions about different BB elements. The workshop gave the authors a space in which they could witness the professors' willingness to improve. Through it, the authors involved both the faculty as well as the students in a critical analysis of the practical ramifications and benefits of implementing BB in the college's educational activities.

### **Area of Focus Statement**

This research project attempts to find out how well ÚNICA professors understand both the concept and the subcomponents of BB. Another objective is to observe how well these professors understand the application of BB in content courses for ESLLs. The authors of this report, as student team-members, consider the inclusion of BB elements to be vital for instructor's lesson planning because BB helps to avoid both boring repetition and the fragmentation of subjects in a curriculum. Furthermore, a well-developed BB activity inspires the involvement of students, especially freshmen who might otherwise feel detached and shy.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe how the faculty at ÚNICA includes BB in their lessons and whether such an inclusion has allowed them to deliver more effective classes. Such classes would be those which connected the subject being taught with other subjects (an example would be a successful connection of English II with British Literature). Another characteristic of what would be considered to be an effective class is when the professor explores and handles the topic with applicability to the student's lives. Expert professors will be able to accomplish such a contextualization without any particular regard to the language in which the class is given. That is, a skilled professor will be able to have Colombian students, whose native language is Spanish, see the relevance of the lesson even while the class is taught in English.

### **Variables**

The authors identified the following variables in the research project:

1. The way in which the professors at ÚNICA connect students' *background* with new concepts.
2. How the professors at ÚNICA connect students' *past learning* with new concepts.

3. What these professors do to include key vocabulary.
4. What they do to include activities related to Colombia as a point of reference for new learning.

### **Research Question**

How do professors at ÚNICA include BB principles in lessons in order to make them effective?

### **Intervention**

The researcher's participation in this study was carried out on the basis of the knowledge of professor's lesson plans as well as observations made on professor lesson-delivery performance. Also, the instructors were videotaped so that researchers could studiously observe any modifications or improvements with BB techniques. Finally, the information was analyzed and findings were shared with professors so that they could work on any areas they would care to reinforce.

### **Membership of the Action Research Group**

Together, the researchers had to find out how the professors were implementing BB methodologies in their classes. Each researcher was responsible for designing the questions which would inform them about how each professor involved in the study perceived the usefulness of BB. The researchers were also responsible for collecting data from classes. Appropriate data was collected by observing the SIOP checklist which the researchers decided would aid for monitoring professor progress. Of particular interest were professor abilities in the design of content lesson plans which included BB. The relevance of analyzing the content classes in the research is that at the college it has been observed that students learn better when the focus is not directly on the language itself, but rather upon its usefulness for professional and academic purposes.

### **Negotiation**

Since the researchers first needed to observe BB activity deliveries, they were required to get permission to observe classes. With that end in mind, a permission form was sent to each professor and to their students. Through the use of the form, faculty and students could indicate their decision to either participate or not in the videotaping. Needless to say, there were no professors who refused to participate, and neither were there any students who expressed uncooperativeness with the research project.

### **Resources**

The necessary resources in order to carry out the sub-study included: a video camera and one questionnaire.

### **Data Collection**

During the project's 30 days, five different means of data collection were utilized to help the researchers see how the educators involved in the study included the BB component in their lesson plans and how they delivered their lessons. The tools used for data collection included:

1. Written reflections from professors based on a questionnaire which had the following questions:
  - What do you understand by building background?
  - What do you consider to be important when building background?
  - How do you build background related to Colombia?
2. Tape recordings and notes taken by the researchers during the meeting discussions based upon what the professors said.
3. Class observations and video recordings of three volunteer professors' classes.
4. Written reflections from the professors on their experience doing BB activities.
5. Tape recordings and notes taken by researchers during the workshop which was on BB theory.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Analyzing professor answers to the first question on the questionnaire, "What do you understand by building background?" the researchers found that a first reaction to the topic of BB is general knowledge; the term seemed to be self-explanatory to them. Consequently, participating professors were challenged to delve more deeply into the issues. For example, 8 of the professors in the workshop demonstrated a deeper comprehension of BB theories through the learning center activities designed for them such as acting out hypothetical classroom situations in which a teacher would use BB. The workshop was considered to be a success. Professors appreciated the skills shared for using BB in real-life situations.

The professors, having gained a working knowledge of key vocabulary, as well as having come to fully understand the meaning of students' past experiences/past learning, afterwards worked on the second question of the questionnaire, "What (information) do you consider to be important when building background?" In answer to the question, professor researchers mentioned the importance of taking into account student proficiency, age, cultural background, expectations and interests.

An actual example (used in the workshop) of how worthwhile it is to consider those individualities can be taken from an everyday classroom situation. The example was given of a teacher in a tropical country who was trying to explain sports to a group of third grade students, but who focuses on winter Olympic events. For those youngsters it would be extremely difficult to connect winter sports to their reality and therefore a solid understanding of the topic would not be accomplished. A well-prepared lesson plan which included sports practiced in the home country would provoke meaningful results for both the teacher and the students.

The SIOP theory manual states that these are precisely the issues that a teacher of an ESLL class should address as he/she makes an attempt to build bridges from past knowledge to new content. Of course, there are other tools which the professor would be wise to use as well, such as teaching vocabulary for stimulating predicting skills and introducing a conceptual framework (Echaverría, p. 123).

For the third question, “How do you build background related to Colombia?” professors affirmed that it was necessary to bear in mind the reality of public education in Colombia when designing BB activities; obstacles such as the lack of resources, student behavior, and social problems (such as family violence) could put the effectiveness of those activities at risk. After months of observations in two Bogotá public schools, we noticed a scarcity of computers, limited possibilities of internet use, as well as an observable shortage of other kinds of supplementary materials (construction paper, educational games, modeling clay, among others) which are factors that could work against the progress of education in Bogotá.

After sharing ideas and participating in hands-on activities during the second meeting and the workshop on BB, professors demonstrated that they had clarified their ideas, and they seemed to have resolved their doubts and questions. Having them do presentations and act out student roles was a fundamental part of the comprehension of the BB component. They also received and gave peer assessment with feedback. The group as a whole demonstrated that they realized the importance of knowing about BB theories. They reported that they were satisfied with having this space to clarify both its meaning and usefulness in their work.

### **Class Observation and Videotaping of Three Volunteer Classes**

The volunteer professors under observation came up with activities that dealt with student’s emotional needs. In one activity created to teach the importance of listening to others, half of the class was asked to leave the classroom while the other half stayed, listening to professor’s instructions. These students were told to ask their classmates about the

most important moment in their lives and act as if they did not care about it, being inattentive listeners. After the students told their stories, the professor in charge asked them about how the conversation went, to which they replied complaining about their partners' attitude, admitting to their feeling ignored and disrespected. This experience touched students' feelings deeply. Through it, they were made to understand the characteristics people must have to make peer assessment and teamwork successful. Key words like *thoughtful*, *good listeners*, *cooperative*, and *supportive* were introduced to define what students need to expect when working together. This BB activity was designed with the purpose of connecting real experiences with content. Peer assessment and teamwork were not new for the participating students since they were reminded of their relationship with the daily situations they are exposed to. As the professors instructed and touched upon student's feelings, it was observed that those particular classroom experiences opened up something in the learners so that the professors would be able to achieve lesson objectives more readily.

Also, it was noticed that as professors shared personal experiences they were able to get their students' attention much more readily; even to such a degree that they were able to highlight key concepts and develop class objectives, something which students many times see to be boring. To exemplify that students learn meaningfully when the content taught involves everyday situations shared by the instructor, a Research Project class in which the main concept was *disclosure* revealed much. The professor started talking about an experience she had over the weekend. Her husband had invited her to go biking up a hill to which she responded affirmatively. However, she hadn't imagined how difficult and painful it would be (something she discovered waking up to cramps the next morning) because she did not have any previous information about the place. She was not mentally prepared. With this story as the backdrop, the professor introduced the concept of disclosure to the class. The connection of a new word with everyday life made the lesson complete. The sharing of personal experiences opens a way for students to recall and relate information. Furthermore, students develop analytical thinking skills which should allow them to develop their own pedagogical strategies.

Another useful element identified in the use of student's background for lessons was the inclusion of higher-order questions. According to the SIOP model, higher-order questions enable students to obtain more precise understandings as well as the thinking skills required in meta-cognitive processes. Some such questions are: Can you describe (something) with your own words? How is (something) related to (something else)? What would happen if...? What do you think about...?



### Findings

Based on both data analysis and interpretation, the following findings of the sub-study of how professors at ÚNICA include BB in their lesson planning to deliver an effective lesson are presented: Sharing personal experiences, movie clips, key vocabulary for key concepts, and recognition of national context.

#### Sharing Personal Experiences

Through the observations, when connecting student background with new concepts, professors allowed time for students to talk about their own personal experiences to tie in the lessons with student's feelings. This approach to instruction (particularly, using class content to achieve class objectives) engaged students during the whole lesson, using the class content to drive students towards achieving class objectives.

#### Movie Clips

To establish links between students' past learning and new concepts, some professors used students' childhood memories, recalling them by means of movies students had seen when they were children. These professors helped us as researchers to understand the usefulness of video clips in pedagogy. Through the clips, professors succeeded in connecting students past learning with new concepts. An example of the use of childhood memories came up during the introduction of the terms *ethic* and *moral* in an Intercultural Communication class. These two words can be difficult to teach since they involve a degree of subjectivity. Nonetheless, the professor's explanation was based on a scene from the *Lion King* when one of the brothers had to decide whether or not to let the other live. The relationship between the two characters opens a big discussion about what would be the ethical thing to do. In turn, the perception every student had about morality was challenged. Questions were raised by students along the lines of: What would you do if...? Or, Is it proper to...?

#### Key Vocabulary for Key Concepts

During the BB meetings, some professors expressed their confusion in reference to the difference between *key vocabulary* and *key concepts*, whereby the research leaders established that key vocabulary would be the words students need to know in order to grasp key concepts. Those key concepts relate directly with the content of the class. Key concepts characterized a topic.

### **Recognition of National Context**

Regarding Colombia and how BB activities related to it, the instructors stated that at any given moment while delivering a class it is conducive to bear in mind the real life concerns of their students. Factors such as age, preferences, lifestyle, religious inclination and many other characteristics of their specific group were seen to be of the utmost relevance for teaching effectively.

### **Action Plan**

An agreement to deliver a list of strategies for BB was made with the faculty. This list would be utilized in the future as a tool in activity design. The agreement was in response to what was shared after taking the workshop. At that time, professors expressed a need to brainstorm different BB techniques. They were concerned with adding variety to the methods that they had used in connecting past learning or past experiences with a new topic.

In addition, it was recognized that peer as well as self-assessment should always have their place in the teacher-training process. Such assessment allows for pedagogues to improve strengths and correct any weaknesses. The researchers suggested to the administration that workshops be given at appropriate times throughout the yearly calendar wherein professors will be able to keep themselves updated and informed about how BB theory relates to practice. Semester workshops would allow professors at ÚNICA to be free from confusion on the BB concepts and the significant elements that make up the BB component such as: the explicit linking of concepts with students' background experiences, past learning as well as the emphasis of key vocabulary (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004).

### **Final Thoughts**

The professor researchers mentioned that BB was a way for awakening student's curiosity as well as a space for listening to student's ideas. They also observed that imposing absolutes upon students is not as productive as instead giving students a chance to create their own schemes. The professors believed this modified BB approach, what we are calling a *co-construction of background*, is highly advisable for use in classrooms. Through it, both students and professors participate actively; the students working individually or in groups, coming up with ideas useful for understanding defined topics, with professors working as monitors, helping students focus and support their opinions.

Those professors who apply the SIOP model are advised to take into consideration that there are two types of background involved when teaching a second language: one related to the second language culture

and the other which grows with regard to new knowledge and concepts. In other words, connections should be made not only with the content, but with the culture of the second language. Thus, the vocabulary used to develop a class should not just be focused on content. A teacher must address the usefulness vocabulary has for students within various cultural contexts. One aspect of the lesson is the second language culture, and the other is that which grows with regard to new knowledge. Considering the cultural/linguistic aspects first when building background, a teacher should also transmit the key concepts of the lesson and should point these out specifically (together with the new vocabulary). The professor researchers agreed on the fact that key concepts and key vocabulary must be introduced, written, repeated and used while delivering the class. The researcher's suggestion in response to that issue was that since students almost always use a textbook related to the lesson, key words could be emphasized by highlighting them in the text.

Likewise, the content and language objectives of the lesson must be designed carefully. The professor researchers noted that there should be greater awareness of academic knowledge tiers of difficulty in the composition of lesson objectives. One quite useful instrument is Bloom's levels of reasoning. Building background activities are often the first step in completing lesson objectives.

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**Milena Patricia Jiménez Vargas** graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Bilingual Education from ÚNICA. She has been working the last 3 years in different institutions teaching English. Adults, teenagers and children have been part of her professional development as well as a variety of experiences in and outside Colombia. Her second practicum, in the US, allowed her to grow significantly. She was part of the research team for the higher educational level application of SIOP. The SIRP research allowed her to develop important tools for teaching using the multiple elements that meet ESL learner's needs. Currently, she is working at *Colegio Nueva Granada* in Bogotá.