

# Backward Design Model-driven Evaluation Methods in Lower Primary English Picture Book Teaching: A *Top Cat* Case Study

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## Abstract

In the context of primary English education, picture book teaching has emerged as a dominant trend, especially for lower-grade students during their critical period of English learning and interest cultivation. Under the national policy of non-paper-based stress-relief assessment for Grade 1-2 students, exploring effective evaluation methods and practices for picture book learning has become increasingly urgent. Aligned with the 2022 new curriculum standards, the Backward Design Model—which prioritizes defining desired learning goals, designing assessment methods, and then planning instructional activities—embodies the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. Taking *Top Cat* (Songbirds Phonics Stage 1, FLTRP) as a case study, this paper explores the implementation of efficient evaluation approaches featuring multi-dimensional assessment, multi-stakeholder participation, and multi-level criteria guided by the Backward Design Model, focusing on practical applications and model validity. Preliminary findings suggest a remarkable increase in assessment-objective alignment, providing a replicable framework for early EFL picture book teaching.

## Keywords

Backward Design Model; Evaluation Methods; English Picture Book Teaching

## 1. Research Background

In 2023, the Ministry of Education and seven other departments jointly issued the Implementation Plan for the National Reading Action for Adolescent Students, under which reading literacy education for adolescents, especially primary school students, has been vigorously promoted in school education, and teaching and research on primary English picture books have matured. Meanwhile, guided by the 2022 New Curriculum Standards' emphasis on the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment, the Backward Design Model has gained increasing influence. However, while widely applied in upper and middle-grade primary English teaching in recent years, its use in lower grades—particularly in English picture book reading—remains limited. In the context of promoting non-paper-based assessment for lower grades, designing an effective evaluation system to efficiently assess English learning outcomes and promote reading literacy development has become an urgent issue to address.

## 2. Theoretical Basis of the Research

### 2.1 Backward Design Model

Backward design is an instructional design approach proposed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in

*Understanding by Design*. It represents a thinking pattern opposite to traditional instructional design, emphasizing that teaching activities should be designed starting from expected learning goals.

At the beginning of instructional design, teachers should first take students' learning needs and achievements as the starting point, clarify teaching objectives, then design effective assessment methods to promote teaching through clear evaluation criteria, and finally plan teaching activities based on these objectives, so as to "keep evaluation aligned with the implementation of learning goals simultaneously" (Cui, 2009). It should be noted that all teaching activities, resources, and methods are designed to achieve the established teaching goals.

## 2.2 Evaluation Methods

Teaching evaluation should run through the entire process of English curriculum teaching and learning to implement the integration of "teaching-learning-assessment" (Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards, Ministry of Education, 2022).

Classroom evaluation should adhere to the following principles: First, the objectives and methods of teaching evaluation should align with curriculum goals, and evaluation results should provide a basis for subsequent teaching adjustments. Second, teaching evaluation should give play to students' subjective role, helping them conduct self-evaluation and peer evaluation. Furthermore, teaching evaluation should reflect the characteristics of multiple channels, perspectives, levels, and approaches. Finally, evaluation should fully consider students' individual differences to conduct effective learning situation analysis, while paying attention to their sustainable development, not only focusing on students' past performance but also attaching importance to whether they can meet expected performance in the present and future.

## 3. *Top cat* (Songbirds Phonics Stage 1, FLTRP)

*Top Cat* is one of the picture books in Songbirds Phonics Stage 1, published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP). At the beginning, the gray cat proudly shows off at the top of the courtyard stairs, claiming to be the "top cat". The yellow cat, hiding in a corner and overhearing this, jumps out indignantly to challenge the gray cat. The gray cat and the yellow cat engage in three rounds of competition, while the white cat and the black cat watch. The story reaches its climax when the gray cat picks up a balloon and flies into the sky. Finally, a bird pecks the balloon, causing the gray cat to fall down. The story ends with gray cat's question, "Am I top cat?"

The full text's beautiful illustrations are fascinating. By observing the cover, one can infer the story is set in a courtyard and deduce a competition through the cats' expressions, as well as anticipate plot development. The cover and author information total 33 words, with "top cat" appearing 6 times, the "I am..." sentence pattern 6 times, and the "Am I...?" pattern 3 times. Repeating key vocabulary and sentence patterns reinforces students' memory. Meanwhile, various exercises, physical performances with facial expressions, help develop students' perception of pronunciation/intonation and language application, enhancing their physical coordination.

## 4. The Evaluation System Based on *Top Cat*

Backward instructional design consists of three steps: determining desired learning outcomes, identifying appropriate assessment evidence, and designing learning experiences and instruction (Lin, 2021). Guided by the Backward Design teaching model and the concepts of the Ministry of Education's English Curriculum Standards, combined with the learning situation analysis of lower-grade students' English, and based on the text of the picture book *Top Cat*, a series of teaching objectives are formulated, and an evaluation system is designed that conforms to the principles of Multi-dimensional Assessment, Multi-stakeholder Participation, and Multi-level Criteria.

### 4.1 Teaching goals

1. Students can phonetically decode 85% of the words in the book using phonic methods.
2. Students can obtain information about settings and characters from the picture book cover and predict the plot.
3. Students can understand the story plot by observing illustrations and the teacher's body language/facial expressions during picture walk teaching sessions.
4. Students can through repeated practice of the sentence patterns "I am top cat." and "Am I top cat?", understand the difference between affirmative and interrogative sentences and the meaning of "I am" in context.

5. Students can imitate the prideful arrogance or frustrated anger intonation of characters, paired with actions, to complete role-playing.
6. Students can grasp the principles of persevering in the face of setbacks and understanding that pride leads to regression, while enhancing interest in English reading.

### 4.2 Multi-dimensional assessment

Multi-dimensional assessment requires the comprehensive development of students’ core competencies. It not only involves language application—understanding the difference between affirmative and interrogative sentences and the meaning of “I am”, as well as using phonics to decode words—but also cultivates observation, logical thinking, and creativity to predict story plots. Additionally, it emphasizes the ability to imitate intonation and gestures for effective role-playing. Once teaching objectives are determined, teachers should design assessment tasks by considering how to determine whether students have achieved the learning goals and which evidence or learning outcomes can appropriately evaluate students’ level of understanding and mastery (Mei & Qi, 2025).

**Table 1. Multidimensional Evaluation Criteria Matrix**

Core competencies	Teaching goal	Evaluation criteria
Language Competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students can phonetically decode 85% of the words in the book using phonic methods.</li> <li>2. Students can through repeated practice of the sentence patterns “I am top cat.” and “Am I top cat?”, understand the difference between affirmative and interrogative sentences and the meaning of "I am" in context.</li> </ol>	<p>Students can fluently decode both letter sounds and core words (cat, top, pop) using phonics. When reading “I am top cat.”, students should show prideful expressions to convey affirmation; when reading “Am I top cat?”, they should use angry/puzzled gestures to express inquiry. Meanwhile, through repeated practice of the key pattern “I am”, students can explain its meaning with teacher guidance.</p>
Learning Strategies	<p>Students can imitate the prideful arrogance or frustrated anger intonation of characters, paired with actions, to complete role-playing.</p>	<p>Students can perceive the characters’ emotions and intonations, manifested in facial expressions that shift with semantic tones—alternating between pride and frustration—while retelling core words and sentences from the picture book.</p>
Thinking Quality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students can obtain information about settings and characters from the picture book cover and predict the plot.</li> <li>2. Students can understand the story plot by observing illustrations and the teacher’s body language/facial expressions during picture walk teaching sessions.</li> </ol>	<p>Through teacher-student questioning and group brainstorming, students can observe information such as the picture book’s title, author, and publisher, as well as notice a proud gray cat and two confused kittens on the cover, along with a golden star above the cat’s head and a lawn beneath its feet. By observing elements like balloons and birds in the illustrations, students can infer plot points such as the gray cat using a balloon to fly and the bird pecking the balloon.</p>
Cultural Awareness	<p>Students can grasp the principles of persevering in the face of setbacks and understanding that pride leads to regression, while enhancing interest in English reading.</p>	<p>Through the picture walk activity, students step into the gray cat’s role to experience the plot of its repeated attempts and failures, answering a series of questions: How many times did the gray cat succeed? How many times did it fail? What was the gray cat’s outcome? Despite its failures, do you like it? The teacher listens to students’ responses and guides them to understand the principles that one should not give up in the face of setbacks and that pride leads to regression.</p>

### 4.3 Multi-stakeholder participation

We should uphold the students’ subjectivity in the evaluation process, enabling them to learn to reflect and adjust their learning methods and states through both learning and evaluation. In teaching evaluation, a multi-stakeholder evaluation approach is adopted, including teacher evaluation of students, peer evaluation, student self-evaluation,

and social evaluation.

When teachers evaluate students, they should keep the teaching objectives in mind, ensuring that their internal evaluation benchmarks align with the teaching objectives. Meanwhile, while maintaining objectivity, teachers should respect the individual differences and personalities of students.

In peer evaluation, teachers can guide students to evaluate their peers' performances during activities like role-playing, or listen carefully to other groups' phonics practice to check for pronunciation accuracy in group exercises.

Student self-evaluation can occur after each exercise, where students compare their performance with that of their peers or teacher demonstrations. Students can also serve as evaluators to discuss and assess the gray cat's behavior—whether they like it or not—thus cultivating their cultural awareness while exercising their subjective role in evaluation. At this point, teachers can transform their role orientation, record the obstacles encountered by students, construct corresponding problem situations, and promote students' deepened understanding of unit goals through a gradual chain of questions (Yuan, 2025).

Students' role-playing works and picture book reading performances can be recorded as videos and transformed into multimodal achievements, which can be submitted to reading competitions organized by various communities. The evaluation results from community-based award assessments provide intuitive feedback on students' picture book learning outcomes, while significantly enhancing their sense of achievement, enjoyment, and interest in learning.

#### 4.4 Multi-level criteria

In teaching evaluation, it is essential to conduct a thorough learning situation analysis, respecting the objective differences in students' cognitive levels and learning abilities while adhering to evaluation driven by teaching objectives. Teachers can comprehensively understand students' current proficiency levels through diverse evaluation criteria, identify the specific needs of different student groups, and formulate targeted learning goals, including both core goals applicable to the whole class and differentiated goals for students at various levels (Li, 2025). Lower-grade primary school students generally demonstrate a high interest in learning English but have a short attention span of about 20 minutes. Meanwhile, they can usually perform simple actions, empathize with characters' emotions in picture books, and roughly follow and imitate key words and sentences. Therefore, most students, with teacher reminders and peer influence, can observe the key elements of picture book covers and eventually understand the perseverance of the top cat in the face of repeated failures and the truth that pride leads to regression. However, about 15% of the class have a good language sense, or even have received after-school English education, enabling them to perfectly decode key words and imitate key sentence patterns. Approximately 60% of students can master phonics through repeated practice and decode key vocabulary with peer reminders while also imitating key sentence patterns. But 25% of students, due to learning ability differences and poor self-control, may need multiple repetitions to roughly understand phonics and the meaning of key sentence patterns.

Based on these objective differences, teachers should adopt targeted evaluation methods and criteria, constantly monitoring students' progress to detect leaps in their learning stages and adjust to higher-level evaluation standards. For example, for the top 15% of students, invite them to demonstrate role-playing for peers, record videos as learning achievements for picture book reading competitions, encourage more self-evaluation, regular reflection on problems, and propose improvement measures to enhance intrinsic learning motivation. For the 60% mid-level students, require them to follow teacher explanations closely, encourage them to use peer evaluation perspectives to identify differences from outstanding peers, learn from others' strengths, and maintain what they do well. For the last 25% of students, teachers should provide timely feedback on their in-class performance, using objective and specific evaluations to remind them to regulate classroom behavior or improve focus.

#### 4.5 Motivation strategies

While carefully designing evaluation criteria, teachers also need to provide students with positive feedback through a series of incentive mechanisms. In each class, students are typically divided into 6 groups, with each student assuming important responsibilities within the group. Organize students to carry out collaborative discussions on material topics in groups, and encourage them to exchange their respective opinions, effective reading experiences, methods, and information inspirations (Xue, 2022). Group members form a collective, where even one student's inattention or incomplete learning will affect the entire group's score. However, if group members actively

participate in answering questions, they can earn honors for their group.

Finally, the group scores and individual positive performances are reflected in stickers. Students can exchange 20 stickers for a small gift, and exceptionally outstanding students will also be praised by their head teachers or parents.

## 5. Teaching Practice Achievements

Based on the Backward Design model, the *Top Cat* picture book lesson has been taught repeatedly in 12 lower-grade classes, and the implementation of teaching objective-driven evaluation has achieved initial expected outcomes. The lesson aims to cultivate students' core English competencies while adhering to the characteristics of multi-dimensional assessment, multi-stakeholder participation, and multi-level criteria in the evaluation process. Compared with approaches that only focus on key sentence pattern imitation, this model also acknowledges students who need language improvement but demonstrate strong observational skills, high empathy, and excellent performance abilities. Through diverse evaluation criteria, it has successfully attracted the attention of 90% of students, significantly increasing classroom participation and interest.

The multi-stakeholder evaluation approach has been implemented: Teacher evaluation helps students clarify classroom expectations, ensuring a smooth routine and maintaining engagement among struggling learners. Peer assessment expands students' evaluation perspectives from merely focusing on peers' language to observing actions, expressions, and intonations. Self-evaluation enhances students' sense of involvement, enabling them to engage more deeply in English picture book learning.

Through tiered evaluation, High-achieving students are challenged with higher standards. Mid-level students progress steadily, and struggling learners stay on track. Every student receives positive feedback, fostering a sense of accomplishment.

However, reflection is needed: while this evaluation system has been highly successful in the *Top Cat* case study, maintaining students' high learning enthusiasm remains a challenge. Further adjustments are required to tailor the evaluation system to different lessons and class profiles.

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