# Integrating 21st Century Skills into Language Teaching Curricula

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**Abstract**

Language teaching is a field that has experienced significant changes over the past three decades, especially with the advent of the communicative language teaching approach. Globalisation has assigned the language teacher new tasks. The latter has become tasked with helping the learner develop the ability to communicate, collaborate, think critically and be creative. The aforementioned skills, which are referred to as 21st century skills, have become an integral part of language teaching curricula. Helping students acquire the skills they will need in their future requires that language teachers fully understand what these skills entail, so that they can create learning environment conducive to their development. The aim of this paper is twofold. One the one hand, it seeks to shed light on the competences and skills language learners should develop. On the other hand, it seeks to explain how the teacher can go about introducing these skills and helping the learner experiment with them.

**Key words**: Language teaching; Twenty first Century Skills; Globalisation; Curricula

## 1. Introduction

Globalization and highly sophisticated communications have profoundly changed people's lives. Each individual has become holder of dual citizenship; they are a citizen in their respective society and a citizen in the global community. Helping people find their ways on a fiercely competitive global job market has become the ultimate goal of education. The ability to adapt to new situations and integrate into new communities has become an indispensable skill that the job seeker must display. As educators, if we are to do our job effectively, we need to keep pace with all the changes that education has been subject to.

## 2. The emergence of new concepts in education

In today's world, the serious threats and challenges facing humanity have burdened education with new duties. Alismail and McGuire (2015) confirm that helping people with their future careers, and helping them succeed as the innovators of the future requires an instructional shift in education. Addressing the challenges of this era requires that schools effectively play their roles in producing people who are endowed with the ability to think critically, collaborate and solve problems. Schools need to undergo profound transformations if they are to produce the kind of citizen needed in today's world (Trilling&Fidel,2009).The attempts at adapting education to the needs of this era has led to the emergence of new constructs and concepts.

### 2.1. Learner autonomy

New technologies have made learning ubiquitous and possible at the click of a button. Making the most of what technology has on offer requires that the individual be endowed with the readiness to learn and pick up new information, anytime and anywhere. The emergence of the concept of mobile learning and situated learning is a case in point. Vavoula (2005) defines mobile learning as any sort of learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunity offered by mobile devices. Lave and Wenger (1990) explain that learning is situated as it normally takes place within activity, context and culture. Becoming more aware of the fact that that learning is a lifelong process has brought the concept of learner autonomy to the fore. Holec (1980) defines learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. McCain and Jukes (2001) confirm the dynamic nature of learning ; they highlight the fact that the rapidly changing nature of our world has made it necessary for people to constantly learn and relearn what they need to know. Producing people who can take charge of their learning throughout their lives is conditional on an education system that sets promoting learner autonomy as its main goal. Ikonen (2013:17) stresses that learner autonomy is set as the ultimate goal of education since it is the basis for personal and social growth.

### 2.2. Critical thinking

Mistaking critical thinking for refutation is quite common among students. Paul (2004) asserts that the term is confusing and hard to define. If we are to help our learners develop the ability to think critically, we must first help them come to grips with what this concept entails. Critical thinking could be defined as the ability to make objective judgement. (Mertes,1991: 24) defines it as follows "a conscious and deliberate process which is used to interpret or evaluate information and experiences with a set of reflective attitudes and abilities that guide beliefs and actions".

## 2.3. Communication

Globalization and the emergence of the concept of intercultural communication have made it imperative to update our understanding of the word communication. The latter should no longer be understood as the mere ability to use language orally. Halliday (1978) confirms that using a language is not only a mental reality, but also a social reality. Therefore, teaching a foreign language must focus on both, the linguistic and cultural elements of the language. Trilling & Fadel (2009) stress that the demands of social relations and global economy call for a much more diverse set of communication skills. By the same token, they state that helping the learner develop the ability to communicate in multilingual and multicultural environments is of the essence.

## 2.4. Collaboration

Collaboration could be defined as the act of working with another person or group of people for the purpose of creating or producing something. In family, at work, and in society, whether we are aware of it or not, we cooperate and  everybody does their share of the work. Trilling & Fadel (2009) explain that collaboration encompasses the willingness to value individual contributions and make necessary compromises. As is the case with all other skills, collaboration is an ability that develops with practice and with experience. To a large degree, this observation would explain why collaboration skills are usually bracketed with communication skills. Seefeldt (2011) confirms the interconnection of communication and collaboration. Therefore, he stresses that helping learners develop their social skills and their communication skills must be done in tandem.

## 2.5. Creativity

For a long time, the use of the word creativity had been confined to works of art and artistic skills. Only recently did educators start talking about creativity in education (Trilling & Fadel 2009).In the same vein, Trilling and Fadel (2009) stress that creativity is a skill that can be developed with practice and time. Vygotsky (2004) states that the entire future of humanity will be attained through the creative imagination. Therefore, he states that more importance must be placed on cultivating creativity in school age children. The aforementioned observations make us reach the conclusion that, irrespective of the discipline, the learner must get enough leeway so that they can make their own contribution to the learning experience.

## 3. The role of the EFL teacher

Irrespective of the subject they are teaching, every teacher is tasked with helping their learners develop the skills and the credentials they will need in their future .However, it should be noted that, for a number of reasons, when the subject taught is English, there are more demands on the teacher. The emergence of English as a lingua franca has made it the key to global citizenship and global cooperation. Therefore, EFL teachers are necessarily tasked with helping their learners develop the skills they will need in this globalized world. Fitzpatrick and O'Dowd (2012) confirm that the concept of global citizenship has called for a common language, and it is English that has taken on this role. The importance of English on the job market cannot be overstated. Algren (2010) asserts that English has become the primary shared language for professional workers on a cross-national basis. In today's world, finding one's way on this very competitive global job market requires reliable leadership credentials. In other words, apart from subject knowledge and degrees, people need to develop the necessary interpersonal and leadership skills. Soontiens (2004) explains that people learn foreign languages, and English in particular, so that they can find contacts, meet people and establish partnerships. Therefore, a successful language class or programme must help the learner develop the aforementioned interpersonal and social skills. EFL teachers are well aware of the fact that they are in charge of helping their learners develop their interpersonal and social skills. However, it should be noted that integrating 21st century skills into EFL syllabi is not something straightforward; it takes a great deal of skill and experience on the part of the teacher. A lot of teachers express their concern about the fact that integrating those skills into a language class might come at the expense of teaching the language. It is arguable that this concern is unjustified. Soontiens (2004) emphasises that a language class is not to be wasted when it comes to helping people develop their interpersonal skills. However, it must be borne in mind that the degree of success in this regard hinges upon the teaching practices that are in

place.

## 4.  Ways for implementing 21st century skills.

In this era of globalization, a successful language class must open up the space for the learner to experiment with what we call 21st century skills. The partnership for 21st century (P21) skills defines 21st century skills environments as the structures and tools that inspire students and educators to attain the knowledge and skills the 21st century demands.P21 confirms that learning must take place in contexts that promote interaction and a sense of community. P21 places great importance on enabling students to learn in relevant, real world 21st century contexts. Translating the aforementioned learning principles into practice has led to the emergence of the concept of problem based learning and project based learning.

### 4.1. Project based learning

The attempts at reforming the education systems in a number of countries has brought the concept of Project based learning (PBL) to the fore (Fragoulis,2009). Moss and Carol (1998) define PBL as an instructional approach that contextualises learning by presenting learners with products to develop. As an approach, PBL brings the world into the classroom since it gets the learner to explore real world problems, issues and challenges. PBL is credited with catering for the need of students who have difficulties with traditional classroom, textbooks and lectures (Hammond &al.,2009).In language teaching, the use of this approach benefits the learner on many levels. Skehan (1998) highlights that PBL enhances learner autonomy and gives the leaner the chance to work on their interpersonal and social skills, and as a result, their language skills develop.

### 4.2. Problem based learning

Problem based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach premised upon the assumption that learning takes place when the learner addresses real world problems. Harmer (1998) highlights that learning a foreign language takes place when the learner uses it to solve real world problems. Aydinli (2007) confirms that PBL aligns with research on second language acquisition, and has much to offer in adult ESL instruction.By the same token, he states that it has both, linguistic and affective benefits. Darling, Hammond et al (2009) concur that PBL surpasses traditional learning methods when it comes to helping the learner develop their critical thinking and communication abilities as well as developing the ability to apply knowledge to real-world situations.

## 5. The need to rethink teacher education programmes

Project based and problem based are two instructional approaches that go a long way towards helping learners develop their critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills. However, it must be stated that translating them into practice in a language class makes enormous demands on the teacher. If the latter has not received the necessary training to incorporate them in their classes, they might run into difficulties. In a language class, asking students to work together on real world problems might come at the expense of the foreign language. Students might lapse into using their first language and stop trying out linguistic strategies to solve the problem on their own (Fragoulis, 2009). The use of a problem based learning approach makes the teacher's task very challenging. The latter must act as a cognitive coach and a model (Aydinli,2007).The use of Project based learning in a language class is not less challenging as it takes a high degree of planning and organization (Aydinli,2007). Helping language students benefit from what Project based, and problem based learning have on offer, requires much interpersonal and pedagogical skill on the part of the teacher. It must be borne in mind that competent teachers are the outcome of effective teacher education programmes. Belhaj and Abderahmen (2015) warn that the vast majority of Tunisian academics perceive teaching as an activity primarily focused on student knowledge and transmissions.

They admit that, until ten years ago, the educational and professional training of university teachers was completely absent from the concerns of the Tunisian University. Bringing about positive reforms to the teaching of English in the Tunisian Departments of English is not possible in the absence of a sound language policy. Daoud (2011) ascribes the problem to the lack of a comprehensive language policy and a sound implementation strategy. He explains that introducing effective reforms in the field of ELT in Tunisia will only be possible if educators and applied linguists, in particular, get involved in language policy matters.

## 6. Conclusion

The requirements of globalization and today's job market have greatly impacted the field of language teaching. A language programme that does not help the learner develop the ability to communicate, collaborate and think critically has become adjudged as out-of-date. Language teachers have to make every possible endeavour to integrate the aforementioned skills into their teaching of the language. Having efficient teachers who can succeed in this regard is conditional on the existence of sound teacher education programmes. However, it must be reiterated that reforming language teaching is a top down process that must start at the level of policy making.

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