

The 21st Century Skills and Language Education

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Abstract

The language classroom of the 21st century extends beyond merely teaching and learning language skills and language areas, such as grammar and vocabulary. To meet the demands and address the challenges of this modern era, L2 learners must not only master language skills but also acquire additional essential skills that are considered vital competences in the new century, commonly known as 21st century skills. These skills primarily include critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. As stated by the National Education Association (2015), traditional skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are insufficient for the contemporary world. Students must also be proficient critical thinkers, effective communicators, innovative individuals, and strong collaborators. Consequently, 21st century education and curricula increasingly strive to integrate these four skills to prepare students for success in studies by enhancing their academic performance, promoting lifelong learning, and ultimately preparing them for the modern workplace.

Key words: Creativity, Collaboration, Critical thinking, Communication

ملخص البحث:

يتجاوز مفهوم تعليم اللغة في القرن الحادي والعشرين مجرد تدريس وتعلم مهارات اللغة ومجالاتها، كالقواعد والمفردات. فلكي يواكب متعلمو اللغة الثانية متطلبات هذا العصر الحديث ويواجهوا تحدياته، لا بد لهم ليس فقط إتقان مهارات اللغة، بل اكتساب مهارات أساسية إضافية تُعدّ كفاءات حيوية في هذا القرن، تُعرف بمهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين. وتشمل هذه المهارات التفكير النقدي، والتعاون، والتواصل، والإبداع. وكما ذكرت الجمعية الوطنية للتعليم (2015)، فإن المهارات التقليدية كالقراءة والكتابة غير كافية في عالمنا المعاصر. إذ يجب أن يكون الطلاب مفكرين نقديين بارعين، ومتواصلين فاعلين، ومبتكرين، ومتعاونين أكفاء. ونتيجة لذلك، تسعى مناهج التعليم في القرن الحادي والعشرين بشكل متزايد إلى دمج هذه المهارات الأربع لإعداد الطلاب للنجاح في دراستهم من خلال تحسين أدائهم الأكاديمي، وتشجيع التعلم مدى الحياة، وتأهيلهم في نهاية المطاف لسوق العمل الحديث.



Introduction

The 4Cs—Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication—represent vital skills for the 21st century, emphasizing a shift focus from mere memorization to dynamic and flexible problem-solving. These skills empower L2 students to succeed in a fast-paced, digital world by navigating intricate information, fostering innovation, collaborating effectively in teams, and expressing ideas with clarity.

The educational framework has changed in response to the demands of labour market, emphasizing the importance of generating new knowledge and its innovative applications. One of the essential factors to consider for fostering economic development is the establishment of a more innovative educational system and the enhancement of graduates' competencies with skills relevant to the 21st century (Zubaidah, 2018; Wahyuddin, 2022). In contemporary times, the 21st century skills are viewed as essential abilities that students should possess for both the present and the future. According to Cyprian (2014), possessing 21st century skills signifies being an innovator and creator. The 4Cs (creativity, communication, critical thinking, and collaboration) are essential 21st century competencies that must be acquired for success in work, life, and citizenship. The partnership for 21st century skills has identified four categories of skills under the title of "Learning and Innovation Skills": "Creativity and Innovation," "Critical Thinking and Problem Solving," "Communication," and "Collaboration". Mastery of these skills will equip L2 students to navigate the complexities of life and work (Benek, 2022). The National Education Association (2015) emphasizes that preparing citizens and employees for the 21st century is of paramount importance. Furthermore, Pardede (2020) stated that the integration of 4Cs skills into learning and teaching must be comprehensive.

The 21st Century Skills and Education

It is evident that fundamental skills are essential to address the evolving educational demands of our age. Education must align with rapid technological progress, globalization, and the demands of the business environment (Erdem et al. 2019; Joynes, et al. 2019). By all the odds, the most important person to ensure this adaptation is the teacher. Effective learning necessitates foundational skills that extend beyond mere literacy and numeracy, commonly known as 21st century skills, with an emphasis on the



competencies necessary for effective teaching. Preparing students for modern challenges entails conceptualizing the skills teachers require in this era, as well as outlining how these skills will be evaluated and developed to fulfil these expectations (Kim et al., 2019). When teachers possess 21st century skills, they are more engaged in preparing students for future life, work and societal roles. The development of social values such as justice, law, human rights and sensitivity is closely related to the social, emotional, psychological and cognitive skills of teachers responsible for educating future generations. As teachers acquire skills that emphasize these values, they can effectively impart them to their students. Therefore, understanding the skills teachers need to provide students with essential life competencies is a vital research domain. Specifically, exploring and prioritizing teachers' perspectives on the basic competencies necessary for 21st century teachers can significantly enhance the understanding and implementation of skill-based education. Such research will help determine how teachers can develop 21st century skills, how educational programs should be designed, and how teacher training processes can be improved.

To enhance the integration of the 21st century skills, it is essential to clarify what these skills entail and encompass, along with their significance and value for students. The subsequent sections present an overview of each skill and discuss their relevance.

1. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is defined by Paul and Elder (2006, p. 5) as “the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.” To Schaferman (1991, p. 3), critical thinking is “reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skilful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.”

This type of thinking is regarded as one of the essential cognitive processes within contemporary educational frameworks. There exists a multitude of definitions for critical thinking, which can be attributed to the varying interpretations of the skill by individuals, highlighting its subjective nature. Nevertheless, Collins & O'Brien (2011) characterised critical thinking as the capacity to employ advanced cognitive processes to pursue comprehension in an action or event. The form of thinking allows us to inquire, express scepticism, analyse similarities and differences, and formulate evaluations.



Furthermore, Richards and Schmidt (2010) defined critical thinking as a degree of reading comprehension or discussion skills, wherein the learner is capable of questioning and assessing what they read or hear. In the context of language teaching, this approach is believed to involve students more actively with the material, and demonstrate respect for students as autonomous thinkers. Well-developed critical thinkers possess the ability to:

1. Raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
2. Gather and assess relevant information, use abstract ideas to interpret them effectively;
3. Comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
4. Think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
5. Communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Critical thinking can be succinctly viewed as a form of thinking that is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective. It demands high standards of excellence and a conscious awareness of their application. This type of thinking involves proficient communication and problem-solving skills as well as a dedication to transcending our inherent egocentrism and sociocentrism (Paul and Elder, 2006).

More importantly, critical thinking is also seen as a key skill in the digital age and the online mass communication. Students nowadays are required to have enough competences to distinguish between false and true information, reliable and unreliable sources, relevant and irrelevant materials, to name just a few. This competence, therefore, is not only vital in educational settings, but also beyond the classroom, in students' future careers and lives.

The Advantages of Critical Thinking for L2 Learners

Given the characteristics of foreign/second language learning, it is reasonable to assert that critical thinking plays central role in the language learning journey. Considering the cognitive effort required from learners throughout their language learning process; the input, which encompasses reading and listening, necessitates comprehension, memorization, analysis and evaluation; the output, which involves speaking and writing, requires processing, evaluation, and creation; the challenging cognitive task of mastering



the structures and systems of foreign/second language, among other factors, underscores the significance of critical thinking as an essential skill in L2 learning. A multitude of researchers and extensive studies highlighted the necessity and advantages of integrating critical thinking skills in education broadly, and specifically within language teaching and learning. As Trilling and Fadel (2009) aptly stated, beyond merely acquiring and using knowledge, the application of critical thinking is essential across all disciplines. This is attributed to the beneficial impacts of critical thinking on students' learning experiences and motivation. It widely accepted that critical thinking yields numerous positive outcomes for language learners. Research conducted by Yang & Gamble (2013), for instance, suggests that critical thinking can enhance students' success and enrich their educational experiences. More to the point, an article from the British Council titled 'Critical Thinking and Problem Solving' (n.d.) outlines several potential benefits that students can derive from engaging in critical thinking. These benefits include:

1. Critical thinking fosters learner autonomy as well as make learners more adaptive in terms of learning beyond the classroom;
2. Critical thinking makes students more active, and later in their lives, this may help them become lifelong learners in the areas they studied;
3. Critical thinking can help students participate more in solving social issues

Activities that Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Activities designed to foster and enhance critical thinking skills can differ within the foreign/second language classroom. These activities may encompass everything from straightforward class discussions to projects that necessitate the application of students' higher- order thinking abilities. More importantly, a teacher can seamlessly integrate language concepts with critical thinking components in these activities, thereby promoting time efficiency and more profound learning outcomes.

It is essential to highlight that numerous EFL language course books nowadays incorporate critical thinking skills within language learning content, aiming to enhance both learners' language abilities and critical thinking skills simultaneously. Some course books achieve this implicitly while others explicitly address critical thinking skills explicitly by making students conscious of their learning and development. For teachers,



this not only facilitates the integration of these skills into teaching but also helps them understand how critical thinking can be integrated into language teaching and learning. A beneficial language activity that can effectively engage language learners in critical thinking involves utilising the phrase “if something happens...” This prompts students to brainstorm ideas, participate in whole-class discussions, engage in essay writing (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan 2020, p. 46). The purpose of the activity is to encourage learners to contemplate what the world or life might be like in the event of unexpected occurrence. They are provided with some specific sentences to assist them in imagining and hypothesizing possible scenarios. Once the learners have shared their ideas, a comprehensive class discussion can be initiated to explore the ideas that have been presented.

More examples of classroom activities that can foster critical thinking include:

1. Predicting Outcomes: temporarily stop videos, films, or stories to encourage students to guess what happens next.
2. Discussions and Argumentations: conduct brief debates on controversial topics associate with reading, which enhances persuasive language skills and assessment of differing perspectives.
3. Open-Ended Questioning: Rather than yes/no questions, encourage students to explain their opinions (e.g., Which job do you consider the most challenging and why?).
4. Riddles and Word Puzzles: Engage with word puzzles, such as "What has keys but can't open locks?" (a piano), which require lateral thinking.
5. Graphic Organizers: Use tools like Venn diagrams to compare and contrast, or fishbone diagrams to analyse cause-and-effect in a story.
6. Role-Playing/Impromptu Plays: engage in scenarios that necessitate logical thinking and language application.
7. Organising and Classifying: use "odd one out" exercises to motivate students to analyse the connections between words.
8. Re-writing Content: encourage students to change the perspective of a story (e.g., retelling a story from the villain's viewpoint) to analyse different perspectives.



In the classroom, students share their interpretations of the story with the whole class, either individually or in groups. At the conclusion of this activity, they illustrate and compose the final segment of the story. The primary focus of this task is on reading and writing, while students also participate in critical thinking as they anticipate the conclusion of the story. These activities encourage learners to analyse, evaluate, and create, which are essential for developing deeper cognitive skills.

2. Collaboration

Collaboration is generally defined as “the process of working with someone to produce something” (Macmillan Dictionary | Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2022). In the context of language education, this term refers to the skill that a language learner is expected to develop while engaging with peers to achieve learning goals. Generally, the learner is expected to make a meaningful contribution within a group, take on responsibilities, and appreciate the input of others.

Collaboration is regarded as an essential component of education in contemporary times. In this respect, Johnson and Johnson (2008) asserted, it is challenging to identify an instructional method, text book or learning resource that does not include cooperative learning. The view also applies to the field of language teaching and learning. The majority of recent language teaching approaches and methods promote and facilitate collaborative learning among students (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Well-known language teaching methods and techniques, including Task-based Teaching and Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, Project-based Learning, to mention a few, all prioritise student-student collaboration as a fundamental aspect of their lesson planning. Furthermore, collaboration and cooperative learning are supported by significant learning theories. For example, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, posits that learning occurs most effectively in social interaction contexts, i.e. in collaboration with others, and emphasises that collaboration is crucial to the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Farr& Murray, 2016).

The Advantages of Collaboration for L2 Learners

Collaboration among L2 learners enhances language acquisition by providing a supportive, low-anxiety environment that encourages active participation, peer support,



and improved speaking fluency. It promotes critical thinking and motivation, enabling learners to collectively build knowledge, exchange feedback, and develop real-world communication skills in a student-centred environment (Clark and Gakuru, 2014). The primary advantages of collaboration for L2 learners include:

1. Enhanced language proficiency: collaborative activities, such as group writing and discussions, provide opportunities for comprehensible input and output, thereby reinforcing vocabulary mastery, grammar knowledge, and overall fluency.
2. Decreased anxiety and enhanced confidence: collaborating in groups alleviates the stress associated with individual performance, fostering a secure and supportive environment that reduces affective filters, which is crucial for language acquisition.
3. Active engagement and motivation: collaborative learning shifts the focus from the teacher to the students, promoting increased participation and rendering the learning process more engaging and interactive.
4. Peer scaffolding and knowledge building: learners can work at a higher level than they could alone by supporting each other, correcting mistakes or errors, and negotiating meaning, which leads to better problem-solving and understanding.
5. Development of social and transferable skills: in addition to language learning, collaboration enhances essential skills including teamwork, empathy, negotiation, and responsibility, preparing learners for real-world communication.
6. Improved metacognition: by engaging in explanation and discussion, learners gain a deeper awareness of their language learning processes, which results in enhanced retention (Nhi Yen et al., 2022).

By creating an environment that provides support to learners, L2 collaboration leads to higher achievement and a more positive attitude toward language learning.

Activities that Develop Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning activities promote active engagement, critical thinking, and social skills by encouraging students to work together on shared goals. Key techniques, include jigsaw methods, think-pair- share, peer editing, role-playing, and collaborative problem-solving, such as escape rooms, and group projects. These methods foster interdependence, ensuring that each participant's contribution is essential to the overall outcome.



Further examples of classroom activities that can foster collaborative learning include:

1. Case studies: small groups analyse intricate, real-life scenarios to apply theoretical concepts.
2. Group mapping/visualization: collaboratively creating, organizing, and designing flowcharts, timelines, or concept maps to visualize learning.
3. Structured debates: dividing the class into teams to investigate and present different perspectives on a topic.
4. **Gallery walks:** groups create posters or displays on a topic, then circulate around the room to review and provide feedback on other groups' work.

These activities promote shared responsibility, active communication, and a more profound engagement with the content material (Hall, 2013).

3. Communication

Effective communication is the paramount skill that L2 learners need to develop during their language learning journey. In fact, the primary goal of both teaching and learning a language is to enable students to communicate proficiently.

Among the various skills of the 21st century, communication stands out as the most prevalent in the realm of language teaching and learning. This prominence arises from the fact that communication serves as the primary focus of the majority of teaching and learning materials. Consequently, this skill is encountered and practiced significantly more in English classes compared to other skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, or creativity. Most of the language teaching approaches and methods that have emerged since the previous century emphasise communication as their core focus, particularly those derived from the Communicative Approach, including Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching. In these methodologies, communication forms the foundation upon which language lessons should be constructed (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

The Advantages of Communication Skill for L2 Learners

The communication abilities of L2 learners significantly enhance their academic success, cognitive capabilities, and social self-confidence. These abilities enable a more precise expression of ideas, faster vocabulary learning, better multitasking, and empathetic relationships with others. Moreover, proficient communication promotes better job opportunities, emotional regulation, and analytical reasoning.

Effective communicative skills have gained significance due to the substantial growth and swift advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT). Digital



tools, online platforms, online media, social networks, and similar resources have emerged as the primary channels for mass communication. Students must learn to adapt to online communication and develop digital literacy, which typically encompasses the ability to locate and assess information online; the capacity to comprehend and interpret information from the new media and internet sources; and the skill to convey information online. Ojebuyi (2019). Mastering this new form of communication equips students for the workplace and realities of life in the 21st century.

Students gain significant advantages from participating in communication and developing communicative competences. Primarily, in an SL/FL context, communication aids learners in achieving fluency in L2 across all skills, including listening, reading, writing and speaking. From a broader educational standpoint, communication serves as a crucial element that influences their academic success and accomplishments, which also ensuring lifelong learning, thereby providing more opportunities for ongoing professional development in their careers.

Effective communication is regarded as an essential skill for career advancement in the modern era; for example, it can assist an individual during a job interview or contribute to their productivity and success in their profession. As McIntosh et al. (2008, p. 4) rightly stated “communication skills can not only help you get the job you want, they can help you be more successful in the job you have.” Furthermore, communication is often closely linked with collaboration, as effective communication fosters successful collaboration, and conversely, successful collaboration reflects effective communication. Therefore, collaboration, team building, and teamwork are increasingly emphasised in job requirements today, and strong communications skills enhance students’ competitiveness in the job market, making them more effective future employees.

Activities that Develop Communication Skills

Contemporary language course books offer a range of activities designed to aid students in communicating effectively in L2, while also helping them develop essential universal communicative skills. Nevertheless, there are instances where these activities may fall short in fostering the desired communicative competences that students aspire to achieve, prompting teachers to seek supplementary materials to guarantee that students are involved in authentic communication scenarios.



Activities aimed at enhancing communication skills include, but are not restricted to, role-playing, public speaking, active listening games, project technologies, storytelling, and nonverbal exercises as charades. These activities enhance speaking, listening, and teamwork by promoting clear, concise, and empathetic interactions. typical examples include debates, interviews, group discussions, and games like 'Two Truths and a Lie' (Rybczynska, 2023).

4. Creativity

Creativity in language learning involves the use of language in inventive, personalized, and non-standardised manners to generate new meanings, transcending mere replication of rules Morar, et al. (2020). It represents a complex phenomenon that integrates cognitive abilities with affective, social, and contextual elements, allowing learners to recontextualize language and express their own identities. According to Collins & O'Brien (2011, p. 110), creativity is defined as "the ability or power to create with originality, innovation, self-expression, and imagination."

Furthermore, Fostering creativity in education is important as it can improve academic Achievement. Fisher (2004) stated that when students are evaluated in manners that acknowledge and appreciate their creative skills, their academic performance improves. Engaging in creative activities can reignite the enthusiasm of students who have lost interest in school, as well as teachers who may feel disheartened by a culture of control and compliance in teaching.

The growing emphasis on creativity as a vital skill has led to a transformation in how educational systems perceive this competence and the extent to which it is integrated into the curriculum. Educational institutions are progressively embedding creative thinking into their teaching and learning materials to equip students for a more creative workplace and society. This trend is evident across all educational stages, from early childhood to higher education. Furthermore, educational institutions are increasingly providing the essential professional development for teachers to guarantee that creativity is comprehensively understood and effectively applied in the classroom (Isabirye et al., 2025).

The Advantages of Creativity for L2 Learners

Jones & Richards (2016) highlighted many advantages of incorporating creativity into language learning. Learners who participate in creative activities tend to exhibit higher motivation, which subsequently leads to improved outcomes. Engaging in creative tasks



encourages learners to take more risks, prompting them to perform beyond their actual linguistic capabilities. Furthermore, the greater the cognitive effort and the more profound the processing of language during these creative endeavours, the more effectively the language is retained and remembered by the learners.

Numerous studies demonstrated that integrating creativity into the process of learning a second language learning promotes engagement, alleviates anxiety, and improves cognitive flexibility. Beyond mere mechanical repetition, this pedagogical approach empowers learners to construct meaning and skilfully manage unfamiliar communicative situations (Cachia et al., 2010).

Activities that Develop Creativity in the Language Classroom

identifying activities that promote creativity is essential for language teachers who wish to integrate this skill into their language classrooms. Regrettably, such activities are not frequently included in language course books (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013). Consequently, language teachers may seek for supplementary resources to guarantee that creative activities are incorporated into their language teaching materials. Below, we provide an example that can enhance creativity.

An interesting and intellectually stimulating activity that fosters creativity among students is referred as “creative observation” (Read, 2015, p. 35). This activity is suitable for young learners and utilizes materials such as images sourced from advertisements that convey a message or aim to persuade people. The aim of the activity is to encourage learners to examine and assess images through creative thinking, raising their awareness of the influence images can exert on people’s lives while also facilitating the use of the target language through visual aids. Learners are prompted with specific questions as they observe the image and attempt to interpret its message, including inquiries about their emotional reactions to the picture. Following this phase, students may be presented with digital images designed to elicit particular responses (e.g., an image of appetizing food intended to evoke hunger and prompt a purchase). Subsequently, they can collaborate in pairs or groups, taking turns to share the images they possess and endeavoring to decipher the meanings and the potential impacts of these images. Finally, the responses can be evaluated to determine whether the intended meanings were accurately interpreted or identified (Stevkovska et al., 2022).



Pedagogical Implications of Teaching the 21st Century Skills

To effectively impart 21st-century skills, it is essential to transition from a teacher-centred approach to one that emphasizes student-centred, and active learning. This shift entails several key implications, including the adoption of project-based learning, the integration of digital tools, the promotion of collaboration and critical thinking, and the implementation of formative, authentic assessments rather than depending solely on standardized tests. Teachers are required to take on the role of facilitators to encourage innovation and independence.

Critical thinking: teaching this skill involves a transition from content-based instruction to student-oriented methods, including collaborative learning, inquiry-based projects, and structured debate. It demands a departure from mere memorisation towards the evaluation of higher-order abilities such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information through genuine assessments that mirror real-life problem-solving scenarios instead of traditional testing.

Creativity and Innovation: It is essential for teachers to grant students the freedom to explore, innovate, and experience failure within a secure environment. This necessitates the use of diverse instructional materials, technology, and the promotion of various, creative methods for completing assignments.

Collaboration: Teaching strategies should incorporate team-based projects, shared goals, and collaborative digital resources (such as shared documents). Teachers need to design group activities that encourage collective accountability instead of merely having students work near one another, frequently employing peer evaluation.

Communication: It is crucial for teachers to teach students communication as a comprehensive skill set, which includes active listening, oral presentation, digital communication, and visual literacy.

Conclusion

To sum up, the skills required in the 21st century signifies a shift from merely academic knowledge to a wider range of competencies crucial for succeeding in the future workforce. By emphasizing the 4 Cs—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity, this paper has illustrated the necessity for education to evolve in response to modern demands. Ultimately, preparing students for an unpredictable future necessitates the integration of these skills into today's curriculum design.



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