

The Applicability of Twenty-First Century Skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms: Potentials and Challenges

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ABSTRACT--*Learning, nowadays, is no longer restricted to the comprehensive acquisition and full grasp of facts and truths. In a century that brings along large advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) in addition to the “unprecedented challenges” at all level; social, economic and environmental, learners from all over the world are required to acquire certain skills and competencies in order to keep up with these advances and challenges and guarantee their positions as active partakers in the labour market in the future. With this in mind, light has been shed on the role of education, especially at the tertiary level, to aid learners achieve such goals. This study was carried out in a newly founded establishment namely the University of Jeddah and had as objective to investigate the extent to which the 21st century skills, which are classified into three sets, are applied and acquired as well as the potential challenges that may hamper the applicability of such skills. Results showed that the participants in this study are frequently and professionally using the ICT set of skills while the third set namely life and career is given less importance from the part of the same subjects. Peer-dominance and proficiency discrepancy are among the challenges that Saudi learners face to acquire the 21st century skills. The findings also imply that Saudi pedagogists and educators need to agree on the skills to be considered the most critical, to pay them particular focus and thus come up with well- defined frameworks that organize the interrelationship between learning and skills so as to create and adopt the most appropriate teaching methods that would help the Saudi learners acquire and develop these key skills.*

Key words--*Learning; acquisition; 21st century skills; potentials; challenges.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A skill is defined as the ability, capacity, or talent to perform a task effectively, with observable results. Its acquisition necessitates special training and knowledge to develop expertise and competence “to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills)” (Business dictionary). It also requires systematic, constant and deliberate effort in order to be acquired.

The term *skill* collocated with the phrase *twenty-first century* refers to the different talents and expertise that someone should master in this particular era, described as the century of technological advancements par excellence, as we live in a world wherein scientific and technological innovations have become ubiquitous. Stunning socio-economic opportunities and challenges, astonishing socio-political changes, and a remarkable cultural revival have characterized the twenty-first century. According to Reynolds et al. (2016), “the 21st century [is] a period of intense transformation, is an unprecedented era as business operations have become so globalized

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that core business competencies place greater emphasis on knowledge, mobility and collaboration” (p.1). Therefore, specific skills must be mastered to engage successfully in this global exchange. Furthermore, the successful manoeuvring in the political, social, and economic landscape of the twenty-first century depends on the acquisition of certain skills by today’s learners around the world, who represent the future labour force. This foregrounds the integral role education plays “in preparing learners to become global and conscious citizens, and also to be ready for challenges associated with the highly mobilized and technology-dominated society” (Reynolds et al., 2016, p.1). To meet the challenges, many voices have called for educational reforms that would support the acquisition of the needed skills in the twenty-first century. As reported by Lotherington and Jenson (2011), globalization and digitization have deeply affected and altered the education sector to the extent that educators are now expected to reshape the academic landscape in a way that promotes professional development, accelerates innovations in e-learning, and enhances digital literacy (cited in Fandino, 2013).

According to Reynolds et al. (2016), at an international level, numerous educational systems, in such developed countries as the United States of America, Belgium and Japan, have made considerable reforms so as to guarantee that younger generations receive the kind of training that enables them to face the challenges brought about by technological developments as well as the changes in the global economy and thus play a more active role in nourishing the society advancement. The need for educational change extends to less developed regions, like the Gulf countries, that are making strides to join the developed world in academic progress. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the key objectives of education, as declared by the ministry of education, are “to support the students to acquire various knowledges and skills, to nurture constructive attitude and behaviour [and] to qualify the individual as a beneficial member of his/her society” (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2004). Referring to substantial reforms that the Saudi education sector has implemented in recent years, Elyas and Badawood (2016) point out that an emphasis has been placed on information technology and interactive learning at many educational levels. This initiative is cohesive with the different capabilities and skills that need to be acquired by the twenty-first century workforce.

II. RATIONALE

In the current globalized and digitized world, the English language has become one of the most important and relevant medium of international communication for social, professional, and academic purposes. Since proficiency in the English language is vital in the twenty-first century, there has been a rising concern about what English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms are promoting and producing. Scholars such as Shoffner et al. (2010) recommend that EFL teachers should move beyond the past focus on “an all-inclusive single literacy” which solely includes the linguistic knowledge to addressing diversified areas of knowledge, including technology, multimedia, social relations, and culture, which reflect the flexible and changing nature of literacies. The English instructors at the University of Jeddah make no exceptions and are expected to meet such requirements which justifies the exploration of the EFL Saudi classrooms to investigate the extent to which twenty-first century skills are acquired, developed, and used by EFL Saudi learners. Despite the evidenced relevance and importance of twenty-first century skills, little research has been conducted to assess their implementation in Saudi curriculums in particular and in EFL classrooms in general, which stands as a strong reason to conduct the current research.

The choice of Jeddah University is owed to its newly founded ELI (English Language Institute) program whose major goals are to equip the Saudi learners of English with the necessary skills to acquire the English language proficiently and help them become successful global citizens.

III. OBJECTIVES

This study contributes to the literature on twenty-first century skills being taught in EFL classrooms by providing an overview of these skills and their application in a Saudi EFL context, potentially helping educators keep stride with the changing educational environment and foregrounding the importance of these skills in encouraging students to take initiative in their own learning experience and successfully enter the modern workforce. Through an investigation of the educational gains of acquiring these skills and the challenges that may hamper their application, the study set guidelines that may help teachers, pedagogists, and policy makers efficaciously implement twenty-first century skills in education.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Twenty-First Century Skills Defined

Twenty-first century skills, also known as competencies, refer to the capabilities believed to be important for the twenty-first century. Ledward and Hirata (2011) refer to these skills as the diverse capabilities and expertise deemed essential for an individual to develop in order to succeed at work and in life. Examples of these skills are technology literacy, team work, problem solving, and critical thinking. Once developed, these skills allow people to create new knowledge through the effective use of multimedia forms and various technologies, work collaboratively despite differences to solve intricate issues, and easily communicate information. With the requirements and challenges posed by the twenty-first century, and to develop a better understanding of the needed skills, many international organizations, consultation companies, governments, and educational institutions have collaborated to establish frameworks that conceptualize these skills. These frameworks provide classification to form a hierarchy of skills in terms of importance. Most of these frameworks, however, referred to identical skills and tend to display consistency with each other. Reynolds et al. (2016) reviewed the literature about frameworks provided to define and classify twenty-first century skills and reached the conclusion that the “Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework”, also known as “P21”, is the most widely cited document because of its detailed coverage of skill sets that are useful in the teaching and learning process. In fact, this framework was founded in 2002 with the motive to position the importance of integrating the 21st century skills in US education. Since then, it has been adopted by many other educational establishments in different countries. The framework is a combination of three core elements, namely, learning and innovation, technology, and life and career.

Learning Skills

This set of skills comprises four major elements related to learning: critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity. These skills are indispensable for learners to acquire to enter the dynamic competitive pressures of the global marketplace (Reynolds et al., 2016). Critical thinking and problem solving refer to such mental activities as analysing, synthesising, and evaluating of information collected from

observation, experience or reflection. Communication encompasses the different forms of negotiation, giving instructions, building relationships...etc which are required in almost all professions. When it comes to learning, training learners to practice authentic communication can be executed through collaboration (Chase et al., 2015). Simply put, the latter term entails the joining together of a group of individuals in order to achieve a common goal. Even though creativity has long been exclusively associated with art, this belief proves to be “misleading” as it is now deemed to be integral to a variety of skills as design thinking, scientific thinking and entrepreneurship (Runco, & Richards, 1997).

Information, Media and Technology Skills

Nowadays, the pace at which technological innovations take place makes of technology acquisition a compulsory skill that learners should develop. Learners are expected to easily access, evaluate, and manage information; create and analyse media products; and use technology effectively to function in a knowledge-based society; a society that relies on the knowledge of its educated citizens for the sake of prosperity and dynamism at economic, social and environmental levels. However, if technology is not implemented appropriately in curriculums and steered with predefined goals, as pointed out by the general secretary of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “the rapid advance of science and technology may widen inequities, exacerbate social fragmentation and accelerate resource depletion” (OECD, 2018, p. 3).

Life and Career Skills

This set of skills covers the ability to be flexible, adaptable, self-directed, socially aware, accountable, and responsible. As described in the P21 (2015) framework, these skills are “necessary to navigate complex life and work environments in the globally competitive information age” (p. 107). Once these skills are infused in EFL curriculums, thus equipping learners with a new set of competences that allows them to act, think, and network successfully, this results in individuals with varied abilities who participate effectively at work and in society. However, despite the previously mentioned promising attributes that might be brought into the classroom and to the society at later stages, “schools and teachers need to be cautious when redefining and transforming their practices and processes based on the 21st century skills movement” (Fandino, 2013, p.196) because certain aspects need to be considered carefully.

Criticism

Even though the term *twenty-first century skills* is newly coined, some of the included skills are not new but have regained importance because of their relevance in this century, thus creating a misconception that critical and creative thinking are unique to the twenty-first century (Silva, 2009). To quote Mishra and Kereluik (2011), “skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and synthesis rather than being novel to the 21st century, have been abilities required one way or another for successful learning and achievement at different historical periods” (cited in Fandino, 2013, p. 200). Silva (2009) argues further that philosophers, such as Socrates, and educators from ancient times foregrounded the importance of critical-thinking skills and called for their integration in education. Another criticism associated with the 21st century skills has to do with the assumption that learning is essentially skill-driven, where learners are expected to become experts in solving problems and thinking critically. Despite the

importance of the latter skills, focusing solely on them would set aside the core knowledge of fixed facts and content – based materials. Therefore, a balance between the acquisition of skills and knowledge is recommended. To quote Hirsch (2007), “education should create a symbiotic relationship between core knowledge and skills because general-purpose knowledge helps transform all-purpose abilities into critical-thinking skills” (cited in Fandino, 2013, p. 197).

The emphasis on skills dictated by the requirements of the twenty-first century and the focus on the role of education in implementing and nurturing these skills led to discarding other values and skills such as citizenship. Some authors contend that the role of education is primarily to aid learners in developing a strong sense of belonging to their own societies and help them practice active citizenship through “the development of free, active and equal individuals with the capacity to choose their identities, entitlements and duties” (Fandino, 2013, p. 198). Despite the criticism associated with the implementation of the 21st century skills in education, it is still of importance to explore their applicability in classrooms. This paper’s focus is on the EFL ones.

Implementation of Skills in an EFL Classroom

Undoubtedly, mastering languages is a core ability in the twenty-first century wherein English as a global language ranks high on the list of languages that should be acquired in order to help its learners communicate intelligibly with the world (Eaton, 2010). In more particular terms and with the shift in focus from the teacher to the learner, the EFL classroom is now perceived as a space that is learner-centred, collaborative, and technologically driven, which aims to aid learners retain the language. In addition, these features which characterize the EFL classroom support the core skills the twenty-first century dictates. Shoffner et al. (2010), for example, opined that in EFL classrooms, learners are required to acquire numerous literacies that involve multimedia, culture, and technology. In fact, the use of technology was highly recommended by Olivia and Asfina (2017) who claim that the EFL classrooms of today should be adapted with modern digital technologies.

Considering the role of the EFL teachers, Gurultu (2018) suggests that English language educators should provide activities that involve authentic, problem-solving tasks the students need in future careers. This can be realized by instructing them to perform complex projects that involve negotiation, collaboration, goal-setting, meaningful communication, and the development of a challenging output. Furthermore, engaging learners in project work helps them collaborate with their classmates, use the language, and apply technology. Larson and Miller (2011), on the other hand, maintain that teachers should raise life- like issues in classrooms that urge learners to communicate, interact, and negotiate meaning by performing a variety of activities, including role plays, exchanging information, and solving problems.

Recently, Saleh (2019) carried out a qualitative research to investigate the incorporation of twenty-first century skills in EFL classrooms at the university of Sabratha, with a particular focus on critical thinking, and found that learners tend to make associations and interpretations when instructed to write about authentic topics that are related to their everyday life such as writing complaints about a delayed order or the reception of a wrong product. He also claims that critical thinking enhances such activities as problem solving, discussion as well as self- and peer- reflection. The teachers, here, were playing the role of guides as they simply encourage their learners to ask questions and react critically to their peers’ answers about a particular topic.

When it comes to multimedia and technological literacies, learners are required to use ICT devices, tools, and techniques (software, hardware and network communication: mobiles, overhead projectors, laptops, tablets, web-bords, video games...etc) in an appropriate and effective way in order to construct, integrate, and evaluate information as well as communicate with others. Within similar lines of thought, Sarica and Cavus (2009) argue that the attributes of ICT are evident in the EFL classrooms as “it is widely accepted that advances in information technology and new developments in learning provide opportunities to create well-designed, learner-centred, interactive, affordable, efficient, flexible e-learning environments” (p. 440). Language instructors, as Bell (2010) mentions, should encourage their students to use web-based communication tools to collaborate with each other to organize their search for information, plan their own learning, and use a multitude of learning techniques, which, as described by Zaidieh (2012), are “easy and quick in terms of accessibility, reviewing, updating, and editing learning material needs anytime and anywhere” (cited in Boholano, 2017, p. 23).

As far as life and career skills are concerned and as articulated in the P21 (2015), today’s working environment necessitates more than mere cognitive skills. Students are required to place much emphasis on developing appropriate life and career skills that would enable them to compete in a global market. In an EFL setting, such abilities include the students’ effective incorporation of feedback and their negotiation of different attitudes about topics raised by instructors to find feasible solutions.

To contribute to the literature on the twenty-first century skills implementation in education and investigate the extent to which such skills are applicable in the EFL classrooms in a Saudi context, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most/least commonly developed skills in Saudi EFL classrooms?
2. What roles do language instructors play to help EFL learners develop twenty-first century skills?
3. What challenges may hamper the successful implementation and acquisition of twenty-first century skills in EFL classrooms?

V. METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The researcher in this study is a staff member in Khulais, one of the male branches of the University of Jeddah. For the sake of convenience to the researcher, this branch was chosen as the setting to conduct this research. Twelve male language instructors, who comprise the total number of language teachers currently working in Khulais, voluntarily participated in the semi-structured interview. The subjects under observation were 235 ELI students studying at this branch. These students were divided into 12 groups.

Instruments

A qualitative approach was adopted for the investigation in this study. Two data collection strands were used. The first set of data involved classroom observations (Appendix A), which intended to identify the most frequently used twenty-first century skills in EFL classrooms, the challenges EFL learners may face, and the teacher’s role in implementing these skills. For the sake of consistency, and to gain a fuller picture of the applicability of twenty-

first century skills in the EFL setting in this study, a teacher semi-structured interview (Appendix B) was used as the second instrument for data collection.

Procedure

During the first term of the 2019/2020 academic year, observations were made on 12 groups of learners, with each group being observed twice. In fact, the classroom observation instrument was chosen because it is largely used across the educational spectrum (Hora & Ferrare, 2013) and helps the observer directly gain authentic knowledge of the teaching/learning pattern in real-time. The semi-structured interview, on the other hand, was chosen because “it has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant” (Dunn, 2005, p. 80). The semi-structured interviews were carried out according to the availability of the teachers and despite the preformed list of questions the interviewer uses, he is able to follow different trajectories in the conversation that would serve the appropriate achievement of the study goals.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Similar results were found among the teachers and students in the semi-structured interviews and in the classroom observations. No inconsistency between the results of the both instruments used was identified.

Table 1: Observation on frequency of use

Twenty-first century skills	Frequency of use	Examples
Learning and innovation	Frequently observed in almost all sessions	Working collaboratively, exchanging views, discussing, finding solutions to problems, asking questions
Information, media and technology	Very frequently observed in all sessions without exceptions	Effective use of different technological devices and applications: search engines, WhatsApp, Blackboard, overhead projector, mobile phones, texting, emails
Life and career	Not frequently observed	Responsibility: Some of the students take responsibilities to be the group leaders when instructed to work in groups.

In teachers' answers to the question about the skills most commonly developed in the English language classrooms, the set of skills involving information, media, and technology ranks first. As Table 1 indicates, the Saudi students being observed displayed full mastery and frequent use of a variety of technological devices, programs, and applications when carrying out different language activities inside classrooms. The technology includes Blackboard, blogs, search engines, instant messenger, and e-mails. It is noteworthy, however, that such technological literacy was not observed to be explicitly taught or acquired in English classrooms. This observation coheres with Pim's (2013) finding that students come to schools with an already developed ICT skill because “[they] are exposed to a range of technology from their very early age at home” (cited in Olivia & Asfina, 2017,

p. 3). This ICT skill was clearly observed to be adopted and used by the Saudi learners in the EFL classrooms under study. During one of the classroom observations, for instance, the learners were instructed to go online, visit a virtual exhibition of art objects, choose their favourite, create a video to describe the object to their classmates, and suggest new ways of using the object. The students used different tools to create a video, which included Screencastify, an extension of Google Chrome with which the students were familiar. Once completing this task, the students showed a high degree of competency in communicating effectively with digital technologies, one of the key skills in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, one of the participants in the interview reported “my students are frequently sending me e-mails; they are happy to use WhatsApp and go online to look up for a word or give extra information about a topic in the classroom. This, I think, makes it easy and useful to use internet-based activities in the classroom”.

Observations also indicated that the students displayed abilities, such as thinking critically and creatively, solving problems, establishing effective communications, and working collaboratively with their peers when asked to work together on a certain topic or make presentations. As a matter of fact, the instructors encourage their learners to think deeply about issues, ask questions, and reflect on answers. Likewise, Daghan et al. (2017) claim that the participants in their study developed and used some of the twenty-first century skills, such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creative learning skills.

In contrast to the use of technology, observations and teachers’ reports displayed no particular career-related skills being used frequently in the EFL classroom. This may be attributed to the fact that the participants observed were in their first year at the university and do not have specific orientations towards future jobs. This lends strong support to Abdullah’s (2016) claim that a relatively large amount of research and numerous reports on twenty-first century skills focus on technology and innovation, while life and career skills are discarded. More studies, according to the same author, are needed to investigate the employment of life and career skills in education to equip learners with the competencies needed to compete in the global labour market.

Table 2: Observed teacher roles and challenges

Twenty-first century skills	Teacher roles	Challenges
Learning and innovation	Guide, facilitator, moderator, controller, collaborator,	Not all students involved in the learning experience, peer-dominance, proficiency discrepancy
Information, media and technology	technology specialist, technology user: he uses a full a range of digital tools.	Accessibility and availability of technological devices
Life and career	Motivator, helper, supporter	No clear- cut opportunities for the learners to develop this set of skills were observed

Table 2 above indicates that in the different Saudi classrooms observed, the role of the teacher was controller, organizer, facilitator, manager, and guide. In effect, most of the observations showed that the teachers were guiding their students in the process of learning, directing them to use various twenty-first century skills, and helping them in the process of skills acquisition. For example, whenever needed, the teachers asked their students to use one of the technological devices. They also urge students to work collaboratively or think critically by instructing them to go through such activities as making decisions, predicting, guessing, and forming opinions about given situation or circumstances. It is to be noted, in this respect, that the same was reported by the participants in the semi-structured interviews who claim that their role is no longer restricted to simply giving information but help their learners reach it by themselves which would yield better learning outcomes. This lends strong support to the findings of Chineze et al. (2016) that the types of occupational roles of teachers in the twenty-first century are “technology expert, facilitator, life-long learners, project manager, collaborator, and assessor” (cited in Handayani, 2018, p. 16).

Table 2 also displays the challenges observed in the Saudi EFL classrooms where the question of what to focus on in the classroom: knowledge or skills is still a debatable issue. Observations and teachers’ interviews showed that learners with higher language proficiency levels are more likely to develop and acquire the 21st century skills than their peers who lack the language knowledge needed for discussions. Students with less proficiency level in English were dominated by the members whose linguistic competence allowed them to express their views about topics raised in the classroom or to control the group work. The same finding was reported by Abdullah (2016) who conducted a research in Malaysia and found that students having problems related to theoretical knowledge and subject content cannot develop life and career skills that are associated with the working environment in the future. He suggested that educational institutions should not only nurture skills but also focus on the academic performance of the students. This stands as a challenge for teachers who should pay attention to the language level discrepancy among learners when implementing twenty-first century skills.

Another issue that stands as a challenge when implementing twenty-first century skills in an EFL classroom has to do with the students’ disengagement in performing certain tasks. The participants in the interviews reported that their role in the classroom changed as more emphasis was placed on the students’ active contribution to their own learning. Some of the students, however, still played a passive role and showed no interest in voicing their views about topics discussed in the classroom. They also showed reluctance to work with their peers. This lends strong support to Kim and Pollard’s (2017) findings that students resisted participation in tasks that triggered their critical thinking abilities or in groupwork activities.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the current research imply that Saudi pedagogists and educators need to agree on the skills to be considered the most critical to the requirements of the this particular era, to pay them particular focus and thus come up with well- defined frameworks that organize the interrelationship between learning and skills so as to create and adopt the most appropriate teaching methods that would help the Saudi learners acquire and develop these key skills.

Although language, specifically English, is one of the core subjects to be mastered in the twenty-first century, other subjects should also be taken into account if a deeper understanding and thus better development of skills are

to be achieved. Therefore, subject-based research is highly recommended to give a clearer picture of the applicability of twenty-first century skills at the university of Jeddah in particular and in Saudi Arabia in general. More detailed, well-researched educational approaches, in this respect, would be of help to guide educators, school administrators, and policy makers through the intricate process of implementing twenty-first-century-skill education. Furthermore, when developing academic programs and designing curriculums, educational systems should include reforms and measures that consider the learners' twenty-first century cognitive, non-cognitive, personal, and social skills to enable them to meet the perpetually changing demands of this digitized and globalized era. Bhuyan (2016) maintains that "what is learned, how it is taught, and how educational institutions are organized must be transformed to respond to the social and economic needs of the students and to society as we face the challenges of the 21st century" (p. 30). Teachers should be careful to the knowledge-skill dichotomy when integrating twenty-first century skills. These teachers are recommended to find ways to balance between teaching the course content and helping their learners develop and acquire the 21st century skills.

Limitations

Despite its relevance as it contributes to the enrichment of the scarce literature about twenty-first century skills in a Saudi context, the present study suffers from a number of flaws.

The first limitation has to do with the breadth of this study. More detailed research that deals with each twenty-first century skill independently would result in a more comprehensive account of the skills and their implementation in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, the population used in this study was restricted to male participants (teachers and students). This prevents the findings from being generalized. A female representation could have led to more reliable and generalizable results. Lastly, while this research took an entire term, that period of time is still relatively short for obtaining more insightful results. Should it be longitudinal, this study would seem more effective in determining different patterns of skills Saudi students can and should acquire and develop.

VII. CONCLUSION

According to Bialik and Fadel (2015), skills refer to the ways individuals use what they know. The EFL classroom is a space where learners, as potential workers, acquire and develop these skills. The findings of this research showed a discrepancy in the frequency of use and development of the 21st century skills in a Saudi context. In effect, a paramount development of the technological literacy was observed, while little attention was paid to life and career skills. The language instructors at the university of Jeddah encouraged their learners to practice the 21st century skills implicitly but no overt explanation of the importance of these skills was observed. Furthermore, this study helped identify challenges that both teachers and learners face when implementing and developing twenty-first century skills. This justifies the sharpening focus on the role of education in the twenty-first century, a period characterized by rapid growth in technology. In addition to its fundamental say in helping learners construct knowledge, education assists them in developing and acquiring twenty-first century skills, which, in turn, allows them to make up vibrant and goal-driven moves, work collaboratively with others with different viewpoints, and seize opportunities to find solutions for complex problems. Therefore, all parties involved in the educational realm are required to participate in creating suitable frameworks to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

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