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A MODEL FOR BUILDING AND FOSTERING KEY COMPETENCES IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH TO INCORPORATE 21ST CENTURY SKILLS[2]

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Abstract: The paper reviews the development of the concept of 21st century skills and offers a model for incorporating some of them in the English as a foreign language syllabus. It presents the results of a project on fostering key competences in academic English that seeks to respond to the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic and keep teaching aligned with the values of contemporary education. The proposed model consists of three main components aimed at developing: 1) linguistic, 2) creative/critical thinking and 3) collaborative work skills. It is based on three premises: a) identifying deficiencies and difficulties through needs analysis surveys, b) customizing course materials to correspond to the core subjects and c) acknowledging the intrinsic link between foreign language learning and achieving intercultural competence.

Keywords: 21st century skills, lifelong learning, English as a Foreign Language.
JEL Codes: I23

INTRODUCTION

Developing learners' competence and grounding teaching, learning and assessment in competence has been one of the central issues in European educational policy for the last decade. The emergence of the concept of competence-based education is related to the long-standing debate on the skills and competences students need to develop to meet the requirements of present-day economic and social changes. A number of frameworks describing 21st century skills and competences have been offered by major international organisations, consortia of business and educational institutions and individual researchers. Countries around the world have adopted many of the skills and competences described in these frameworks in their educational standards taking into consideration national contexts. The debate how to best implement sound principles of teaching and assessment of 21st century skills and key competences is continuing on different levels – international, national, institutional and individual.

Following this trend a project entitled *A Model for building and fostering key competences in academic English to incorporate 21 century skills* was launched by the Foreign Languages Department at Ruse University in Bulgaria. The overall aim of the project was to suggest ways to innovate curriculum and practices in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) module to meet the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic and to keep teaching aligned with the values of contemporary education. One of the major outcomes of the project is a model for teaching EFL to be adopted by faculty members. The model is based on an analysis of some of the existing conceptions of 21st century skills and competences for lifelong learning, a survey of students' needs and re-examination of work practices in the department.

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EXPOSITION

Defining 21ˢᵗ century skills

Teachers, educational researchers, policy makers, politicians and employers have been discussing the set of skills and competences that students should acquire to meet the demands of developments in the current century for more than two decades. As new technologies are constantly changing the way people learn, work, live and function, as routine work and tasks are being replaced by non-routine manual and cognitive work and tasks, as jobs disappear and emerge faster than before, the skills that citizens need to function effectively in society have been redefined. It is acknowledged that subject knowledge and basic skills are necessary but no longer sufficient to meet the complex requirements of today's increasingly competitive global economy. Numeracy and literacy are just as important today as they were in the past but more transversal and higher order skills such as information processing and collaborative problem-solving skills are increasingly valuable for citizens to be able to effectively take part in life today whether personally, socially or professionally.

There exists a plethora of definitions of 21ˢᵗ century skills all of which are related to the need for education to develop skills which promote learners' personal growth, citizenship and preparation for the world of work. Many of the definitions come from documents issued by international organizations and consortia of companies, universities and government agencies. These include the European Union's Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Union, 2019) the UNESCO framework (UNESCO, 2017), the OECD DeSeCo framework (Rychen & Salganik, 2003), (Wagner, et al., 2006), Partnership 21 framework (Battelle for kids, 2019) and the ATC21S framework (Griffin, McGaw, & Care, 2012) to name but a few. All frameworks share common ideas and the definitions in them despite certain variation express a more or less unified view of experts and stakeholders globally. In this paper first, we will look at the ATC21S framework and the European Union Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning and then we will compare three more sources.

The ATC21S framework was developed after examining various national frameworks and reflects what was found to be common amongst them. It is also known as *The KSAVE Model* and comprises ten skills grouped into four categories:

Ways of thinking
1. Creativity and innovation
2. Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making
3. Learning to learn, metacognition
Ways of working
4. Communication
5. Collaboration (teamwork)
Tools for Working
6. Information literacy (includes research on sources, evidence, biases, etc.)
7. ICT literacy
Living in the world
8. Citizenship – local and global
9. Life and career
10. Personal and social responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence (Binkley, et al., 2012)

The Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning identifies eight key competences essential to citizens for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. The key competences are a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Hoskins and Crick state that a competence can be defined as a 'complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desires which lead to effective embodied human action in the world in a particular domain' (Hoskins & Crick, 2010, p. 122) in other words being competent means being able to actively apply a combination of knowledge,

skills and attitudes to successfully react to a situation or solve a problem in the real world. All eight competences relate to the skills described in other frameworks:

Literacy competence

Multilingual competence

Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering

Digital competence

Personal, social and learning to learn competence

Citizenship competence

Entrepreneurship competence

Cultural awareness and expression competence (European Union, 2019).

The eight competences logically follow from the set of skills defined in previous reports and other publications as can be seen from Table 1 which summarises some of the key developments of the 21st century skills concept formation.

Table 1. The concept of 21st century skills

Year	Organisation	Report/book	Key idea	Skills
1996	UNESCO	Learning: Treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission of education for the 21st century	The four pillars of education	Learning to know Learning to do Learning to be Learning to live together
2006	The Change Leadership Group at Harvard University	Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools	A development of the idea of the new three R's Reinvestment Reinvention Responsibility	Critical thinking and problem solving Collaboration and leadership Agility and adaptability Initiative and entrepreneurship Effective oral and written communication Accessing and analysing information Curiosity and imagination
2007	Partnership for 21st century learning (NGO USA)	Framework for 21st century learning	the 4 Cs	Communication Collaboration Critical thinking Creativity
2019	EU	Key competences for lifelong learning	8 key competences	Literacy competence Multilingual competence Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering Digital competence Personal, social and learning to learn competence Citizenship competence Entrepreneurship competence Cultural awareness and expression competence

Creating a 21st century skills learning environment

The skills and competences discussed so far are meant to be applied in every educational setting despite the fact that a lot of publications and research focus on school education. The point in question here is that the model for language teaching, irrespective of the setting has to keep in pace with the rapid changes regarding the key shifts in understanding academic success. Moreover, students everywhere seem to be ready for the changes. For example, a recent survey on needs and expectations about foreign language education carried out at Ruse University among 1st and 2nd- year students found out that 94% of the respondents are used to using internet based resources to study English. Some of them admit that their preferred language of learning is English or that they often depend on English when searching for information for their studies. Nearly half of the students answer that they often use English as an instruction language for their education.

While the data suggests that some of the students have fostered an ability to learn and to process information by using languages different from their native ones, it also poses an important question: If our students are ready to learn in a new way and if they already have some of 21st key competences, how prepared are we, as a department and as teachers to meet the new requirements?

A new, integrated approach to teaching and learning seems to be crucial especially having in mind how relevant ELT is to global academic achievement: skills received in the English language classroom serve as foundational ones for a better academic performance in an increasingly digitalized world connected by the medium of a new lingua franca, i.e. English. Accordingly, the department has started to employ techniques that require greater and more active students' involvement through project and inquiry-based tasks close to their studies but carried out in English.

However, there are important issues that need to be considered. For example, a pilot study on project-based learning performed at our FL department showed that despite the benefits of project work for students, the complexity of the tasks could impede learning if they are not targeted at the proximal development zone of the trainees (Stefanova & Georgieva, 2021). An online project-based activity carried out in a foreign language engages different types of literacies and a complex set of competencies, e.g. reading carefully for understanding, working with a variety of information sources and assessing their quality, using digital tools to produce presentations that can motivate and engage an audience, etc. This complexity can place a serious burden on students whose level of English is relatively low. This suggests that students have to be supported at every step and that a careful initial discourse analysis of the target language of the project task is required. It also indicates a strong need for the materials and instruction to be targeted towards the project expected outcomes. Learner independence is another key notion that underlines success in project work and learners should be consciously trained to develop the necessary skills. All this should be done in a very robust way with a lot of scaffolding especially for weaker students as it cannot be assumed that language skills will improve automatically only because students are engaged in tasks that require them.

Having all this in mind as well as considering the established good working practices in the department we set here to propose a model for integrating 21st key competences in foreign language education in an academic setting (Fig. 1). We base the model on three important premises we use in our work and three key - 21st skill areas:

Premise N1 English language instruction in a university setting should be based on compensating for lacks and difficulties and targeting specific needs identified through needs analysis surveys, placement tests, interviews, etc.

Premise N2 Course materials are customised with students' core subjects in mind and are often tailored to meet the different group's language strengths, weaknesses and levels.

Premise N3 Foreign language education and intercultural competence are intrinsically related and the link is reflected in most instruction materials, be they published or custom-made.

The three global skills areas to address in our teaching are Language/Linguistic literacy, Creativity and Critical Thinking Skills and Collaboration/Teamwork skills. Incorporating them together we propose the following model:
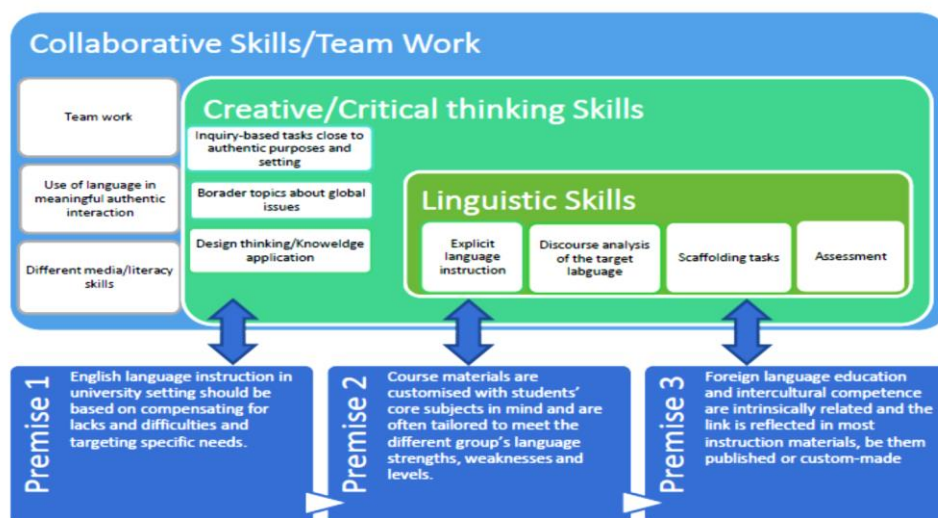

Fig. 1. A model for EFL instruction incorporating 21st century skills

The model is meant to be inclusive and we consider its core to consist of Linguistic Skills as English is a foreign language for our students. Explicit language instruction seems to be necessary: for example, the most important problem area our students identified in the above-mentioned survey is grammar competency. Robust discourse analysis of the target language and scaffolded tasks to facilitate learning and retention also seem to be necessary ingredients for successful teaching (Cf. Georgieva & Risova, 2021). Also, at university level, higher level academic skills should be targeted and in this respect the identification of what learners do not know and/or cannot do in relation to the demands of target situations that emulate real-life study and work environments is crucial for the model. In addition, grammar acquisition becomes more meaningful in the context of rich and meaningful content and as a process rather than as a mastery-oriented goal. Another key issue included in this core is that of 03

ssment. The use of consistent routine around a cycle of *reading - discussion- writing- presenting* incorporated in the lesson should ensure robust assessment techniques that also include the skills included in the other layers of the model.

Critical thinking skills should encompass language instruction all the time, as language and thought are intrinsically related. They should guide the development or selection of instruction materials as well as the elaboration of task and project work. Learning should be organised around content-rich modules and themes that can ensure that the relationship between literacy, language and communication and cognitive flexibility is forged even stronger, so that learners are mentally active and engaged in the learning process. Design thinking based on a routine of problem-solution and knowledge application facilitate language use and retention at an even greater extent.

Collaboration and team work are expected to be included in the language instruction by all means. Our research showed than these are the skills our students lack most. However, they can be easily accomplished in a communicative language classroom so we suggest explicit training and exercises aimed at understanding how students can successfully participate in group discussions, how they can support and complement each other and how goals can be achieved through group effort. Working with varied visuals and media types when receiving or presenting information and collaborating on the process is also included in this layer. All in all, using a foreign language for authentic purposes even in a simulated environment can benefit students greatly even more so when higher level skills are at stake.

CONCLUSION

To meet the demands of today's society language instruction should be organised in a way so that the skills needed to succeed at university directly correspond to the skills needed in most workplaces. Achieving this aim is facilitated by the fact that the integration of 21st century skills into EL teaching builds upon traditions such as the emphasis on the communicative approach and collaborative work. Thus by mingling tradition and innovation we have a chance to teach our learners life skills that go beyond the language classroom.

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