
21st Century Skills in E.L.T.

A Handful of
Thoughts

Written by The Prairie Dog
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Much has been said about 21st Century Skills in English Language Teaching. But what are these skills? In what way are they different from 20th Century skills? Most importantly, what constitutes the 21st Century citizen?

In today's global era, citizens are expected to be prepared to change quickly, be on the move, travel with ease, work abroad, communicate fluently, understand different accents, develop teamwork, respect cultural diversity and use technology efficiently. A good, flexible knowledge of English is a key element to success. Therefore, teachers of English have a particularly important role in helping to shape skilled 21st Century citizens. To make that possible, teachers need to put today's student's needs under the microscope, as that will show them what the aforementioned skills are supposed to be.

21st Century skills differ from those of the 20th Century. In the past, teachers used to have the power to amaze, surprise or even shock their students. All that was required was a song, a short video or a simple poster. Some might say that teaching used to be easier, because students were generally better behaved, most dropped school at a younger age and tools were less varied and mostly not accessible to students outside the classroom. Young people now expect everything to be "fast and furious" and that keeps teachers on their toes. The relationship between teachers and students has changed immensely. 21st Century kids are wired at all times, twenty-four-seven. They are the "cyberkids", totally connected from birth and with thumbs ready to click a thousand times per minute! Easy knowledge is available in limitless amounts and there are floods of information everywhere, with no obstacles or even costs. This is why students tend to be more cynical regarding their teachers. They are more subjective about them, they question their methods and their attitudes. That is a consequence of today's society, and while it is not necessarily a bad thing, it does demand training on the part of the teachers. Consequently, teachers should be prepared to accept the need to be empathetic, take criticism, tackle problems like cyberbullying, discrimination and/or depression, understand that students need to like and feel liked in order to invest in learning and acquire all the skills, whether English language or social skills. This in itself implies a series of *21st Century Skills* for the teachers, which they must be aware of if they want to continue being good, effective professionals.

The world is changing more and more rapidly, creating new challenges for education. Schools have to adapt to these social changes and demands and adopt new strategies and methods. But school systems in most countries are full of contradictions:

on the one hand, teachers have to prepare students for ever-growing, traditional exams starting earlier and earlier, on the other, we are expected to prepare students for life, pass on the necessary skills for jobs that are still to exist, teach them to adopt a sustainable lifestyle, promote their autonomy and above all be happy, creative, self-fulfilled citizens.

As far as I am concerned, school as an institution has lost ground. The race is becoming too fast to catch up, and so it is also the role of teachers, as responsible educators and citizens, to push their schools forward. Schools have to change more quickly and effectively - they have the tools, but, in many cases, lack the dynamics. For instance, in some schools in Portugal it is not permitted to use a variety of internet tools, such as YouTube or Facebook in class, the use of mobile phones is viewed with suspicion and access to certain sites is blocked, even to teachers. Teachers must show the powers that be that technology is here to stay and that, more than a luxury, it is now a necessity. Students are completely immersed in it. Therefore, good teachers have embraced technology and the mastering of digital tools as a *Basic 21st Century Skill*.

In other words, teachers are expected to be dedicated, lifelong learners of technology while, at the same time retaining and even improving their interpersonal skills. 21st Century teachers need to be excellent communicators, be it on or off-line because, for their students, communicating is a basic need, both personally and professionally. In order to fully prepare their students, the English language teacher must juggle with “old” and “new” in an intelligent, balanced way so as to keep the teaching / learning experience as fresh as possible, for as long as possible. Thus, trying to constantly “wow” students with new technologies, for fear of being accused of being a dinosaur, is not the answer. Teachers cannot dismiss the power of technology. For example, it allows us to develop projects which were, if not impossible in the past, much more restricted than they are now. Comenius, eTwinning, Erasmus and other types of international exchange programmes / projects, not to mention all the tools and platforms made available to us all, like Skype, YouTube, Moodle, TwinSpace, Movie Maker are mere examples of such new possibilities. Most of us take these for granted now and use them to produce and share materials and communicate with colleagues and students in Portugal and abroad. However, it is equally effective to recycle traditional strategies and activities which for the teachers might seem antiquated, but for the students will now be a novelty. There are a number of such less than modern activities

based on physical movement, competition and time pressure. Examples of these are Spelling Bee Contests, Grammar Auctions, Running Dictations, Role-plays, Mini Project Presentations, Readers' Theatre, Board Games, Show and Tell, Timed Speaking Activities and Dictionary-based Tasks, to name but a few. Games have always played an important role in English Language Teaching. Now as before, they stimulate the students, develop communication skills and encourage problem solving. They can be updated with the help of today's technology which offers a large variety of interactive games that can be used for pleasure and learning. Teachers can harness the power of technology and computer games in the English language classroom to improve learning outcomes.

In a highly competitive, fast-paced society which demands instant feedback, 21st century teachers have had to reflect on the way they assess their students' development. Once again, teachers can use technology as an ally making it easier and quicker to give their students instant online feedback on teaching / learning dynamics, while at the same time, reducing their carbon footprint. In today's era, using so much paper is a contradiction in terms. 21st Century teachers must cease to feel seduced by the vast amounts of paper still produced by publishers to sell their books, and turn their attention more and more to webinars, tutorials, learning labs and teachers' groups which continuously proliferate, free of charge, in the World Wide Web.

In conclusion, realising the importance of professional development, joining online communities, participating in webinars or podcasts, or engaging in collaborative research by distance is, perhaps, the most important 21st Century Skill in E.L.T. This will help teachers acquire and teach today's basic skills: Critical thinking & problem solving; Creativity & innovation; Collaboration, teamwork, & leadership; Cross-cultural understanding; Career and learning self-reliance, the 7 Cs mentioned by Trilling and Fadel (2009).