

INTEGRATING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS INTO TEACHING ESP

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Abstract: The paper starts with the disambiguation of the key words we will use in order to show how integrating the 21st century skills into teaching English for Specific Purposes improves both the students' ability to acquire English and their range of skills, abilities and attitudes that are required to work and live in an information society. Thus, students can apply what they learn during their English lessons to their main field of study as well as to life. They learn how to communicate effectively in the real world and develop critical thinking and other practical, real-world skills, such as study skills and writing techniques.

Keywords: education, ESP, teaching, skill, technology.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that, today more than ever, technology, especially information and communications technology, has a massive impact on the present-day workplace and lifestyle. The influence of technology has considerable implications for the educational system. Modern students were raised with the latest technology, for example, internet and personal computing, which is a second nature for them. Not to give them the opportunity to use it would mean to remarkably cheapen the acquisition and use of the 21st century skills. Not having strong skills would make students uncompetitive on an increasingly competitive labour market, in a dynamic, energetic and demanding society. And more: these skills are increasingly in demand as new technologies change the way we learn, work and live in our society nowadays.

English is acknowledged to be an international language and that means, as Sandra Lee McKay (2002) puts it, that it has developed to where it is 'no longer linked to a single culture or nation, but serves both global and local needs as a language of wider communication'. As we, the citizens of this century, need English more and more to keep up

with technology in our world today and today's students have to use English in order to keep in touch with the latest global developments in their field, everybody agrees with the fact that good English language skills should be taken into account in the effort to equip young people with the competences needed to meet labour market demands.

21st century skills and ESP

What do we understand by 21st century skills?

We will use the term 'skills' as a generic term, covering aspects of ability, knowledge, attitudes values, ethics, and competencies, not because we are not aware of each and every definition of the terms named above, but because we need an umbrella term for all the 'must-haves' in our career and life in this century. For example, nowadays employers look not only for knowledge or skills or abilities, but for all of them during the hiring process or for promotion.

The 21st century skills are a set of abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed in our society. The framework for 21st century learning was developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21 – an American organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for every student) and names three types of skills, each encompassing certain abilities:

1. Life and Career Skills: • Flexibility and adaptability • Initiative and self-direction • Social and cross-cultural skills • Productivity and accountability • Leadership and responsibility;
2. Learning and Innovation Skills, including the 4 Cs: • Critical thinking and problem solving • Communication • Collaboration • Creativity and innovation;
3. Information, Media and Technology Skills: • Information literacy • Media literacy • ICT (information, communications and technology) literacy.

Now let's look at ESP. Master and Brinton (1998) explain that English for Specific Purposes or ESP is one of the two subcomponents of English language teaching or ELT, the other component being EGP (English for general purposes). ESP is a term that refers to teaching or learning English for a particular career. Linguists say that it was born in the 1960s. The term 'specific' in ESP refers to the specific purpose for learning English, so students approach the study of English through a field that is relevant to them. In other words,

the ESP approach enhances the relevance of what the students are learning while their interest in their field motivates them to interact with speakers and texts.

Dudley-Evans (1997) defines ESP in terms of absolute characteristics (ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners; it makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; it is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre) and variable characteristics (ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines; it may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English; it is likely to be designed for adult learners; it is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students; most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems), which helps understanding ESP better. Theoretically, this means that students are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies. But does this really happen in practice (especially in Romania) if teachers are not concerned about integrating 21st century skills into their teaching?

As we wanted to find an answer to the above question, we started searching for it. We realised ESP was a too narrow field, so we thought of how (and if) applied skills are taught in school and/or high-school. Due to the fact that we could not find a Romanian survey about or related to our topic, we will give as an example a small part of the answers The Conference Board got to the general question ‘What can employers do to make their new employees ready to work?’ During the second quarter of 2008, The American Society for Training and Development, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management surveyed 217 employers to examine corporate practices on training newly hired graduates at three educational levels: high school, two-year college, and four-year college. The employers reported that they have a ‘high need’ for training programs in these skills: critical thinking/problem solving – more than 90 percent, creativity – nearly 70 percent, ethics/social responsibility – just a little bit more than 70 percent, lifelong learning/self-direction 64%. It is obvious why the respondents need those programs: because their employees lack those skills. And if we read again the skills they need, we notice they are the so called 21st century skills. Or, at least, part of them. In conclusion, employers – we are sure that not only the American ones, but also the European employers –

need candidates who possess good 21st century skills. Unfortunately, education has failed in its duty of training citizen of the 21st century.

In order to find out what is going on in Romania from this point of view, during the last two academic years, that is 2014 – 2016, we asked 200 students from *Spiru Haret* University to fill in a questionnaire about their interests in studying ESP and acquiring 21st century skills. The respondents chose for each category the skills they think they need in order to be successfully prepared for a career and civic participation: 1. Life and Career Skills: flexibility and adaptability – 77%, initiative and self-direction – 29%, social and cross-cultural skills – 24%, productivity and accountability – 21%, leadership and responsibility – 49%; 2. Learning and Innovation Skills: critical thinking and problem solving – 24%, communication – 27%, collaboration – 26 %, creativity and innovation – 23%; 3. Information Media and Technology Skills: information literacy – 12%, media literacy – 7%, ICT (information, communications and technology) literacy 81%. In conclusion, among the most important skills are: flexibility and adaptability, communication and ICT literacy.

After finding out that only 17.5% of the respondents think that they possess all the 21st century skills they need in order to be successfully prepared for learning, working and living in the modern society, we also asked them to tell us if learning 21st century skills integrated with English for Special Purposes will help students be ready for their chosen career. The result was satisfactory: 87.5% completely agree or agree.

The respondents were also asked to write five skills they think it is best to be integrated with ESP during their lessons. Not surprisingly, the most asked skills were: communication, collaboration, ICT, critical thinking, leadership, social and cross-cultural skills.

Integrating 21st century skills into teaching ESP

An ESP class at *Spiru Haret* University is a community of people aged usually between 20 and 55, who bring both their vast experience and different needs to the classroom. In order to help them learn English and develop the skills needed most by today's society, they could interact about things that really matter, communicate their thoughts and feelings appropriately and collaborate to increase their awareness of other concepts. As defined by Reagan, Fox and Bleich (1994), collaboration is an underlying social orientation in which the

participants share a general sense of purpose and orientation, and a discernible set of roles. Taking all the above things into consideration, we suggest using real life problem solving, developing and administrating questionnaires, making presentations and using the internet or different media while working in teams, collaborating with peers during the ESP classes, inside or outside the classroom.

With Law students we use Lyman's 'think-pair-share' method (1992) as a starting point and go on with a debate, sometimes a whole-class debate as suggested by Frederick (2002), during an ESP class in order to help students master the communication, collaboration and critical thinking and problem solving skills. The class is given an issue related to the topic of that day course and up to a minute to think of or put down their answer(s). For example, topic: Forms of Punishment, issue: death penalty should be illegal. Students then pair up and explain their responses to one another for about three minutes. Now they are required to vote on the issue. The class is divided into three groups: one for, one against, and the audience, one group taking notes and deciding who brings the better arguments. The 'for' and 'against' groups are asked to give three statements supporting their side of the issue. Each argument is followed by a rebuttal from the opposite side. To achieve closure, the debate ends with a summary of the 'for' and 'against' arguments. The audience vote for the group they think supported their opinions best. Then the whole class is asked to vote again and students who changed their votes are asked why they did so.

Other activities that actively involve students in the learning process and lead them to acquire and practise 21st century skills during the ESP courses are questionnaires/surveys, project work and presentations. Stoller (2002) discusses survey use as a technique to facilitate project-based work in the classroom. Due to the page number limitation of this article, we will not detail each and every activity; we will just give the guidelines. Thus, with students one can use the questionnaire project because, as Chea Kagnarith and co. (2007) said, with it students go through stages of 'creating questions, collecting data, and analyzing and reporting results while developing their L2 skills through brainstorming, research, writing, problem solving, and group work'. We adapted their steps for using the questionnaire as a teaching tool and, more important, we let and encourage students use modern technology and different types of media in order to carry on their task. Thus, after forming the groups and having a topic (for example, with Law students, the topic: compulsory voting), students choose the

questionnaire format and brainstorm about the data to be collected. Constructive criticism is a must in order to move on to the next stage which may be done outside the classroom, with the help of technology. Collaboration is now a real-time event. Using free products like Google Docs, Dropbox or WhatsApp, every member of the group can watch the others' work and can improve the initial draft of a paragraph or question, editing all the questions and putting them in a logical order. As soon as the draft of the questionnaire is proofread by the teacher, the final version is administered. After collecting the information, students have to put important data into graphs, using their or their peers IT skills. The results are presented either orally – a presentation, or in written – a report.

With or without the students' knowledge, the above mentioned activities integrate 21st century skills into teaching ESP. They should feel better because after taking part in such activities, they acquired and developed the following skills: flexibility and adaptability, initiative, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and practised the media and ICT skills.

Conclusion

This century society requires people who have both knowledge and skills as knowledge is not sufficient for a successful citizen today. Communication and collaboration are just two of the skills needed by the modern students to be able to apply their knowledge and, why not, continue learning. They want to be connected to real-world problems, so they learn better when their academic courses are connected to their interests. While learning ESP we think that students also need to think deeply about local and global issues, solve problems creatively, communicate clearly in many media, and deal with a flood of information. The rapid changes in our world require students to be flexible, to take the initiative and lead when necessary, and to produce something new and useful, so contributing to a debate, developing and administrating questionnaires, making presentations, using the internet, working on case studies in teams and carrying out projects are just some of the ways how integrating 21st century skills into teaching ESP can really help students become 'qualified' citizens.

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