

Becoming Life-long Learners: Preparing EFL Students for the Future

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on preparing students majoring in EFL for the future and helping them to become life-long learners. They should be prepared to 21st century with its skills including 4 cs. These comprise communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. They should also be trained to become life-long learners. Life-long learning enables students to learn continuously regardless of time or place. It also requires that EFL students learn how-to-learn, learn how to work, learn how live with others, and learn how to be. To achieve such requirements, EFL teachers should help students learn through self-directed learning (autonomous learning), project-based learning and challenge-based learning. Definition, importance and how to use such strategies in EFL classes are dealt with.

Key words: EFL students, 21st century skills, Life-long learning.

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى أهمية إعداد طلاب شعبة اللغة الإنجليزية إلى المستقبل وأن يتمكنوا من مهارات التعلم مدى الحياة، كما يجب إعدادهم لمهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين والتي تشمل على 4 Cs التواصل والتشارك والإبداع والتفكير الناقد. إن هذه المهارات بصيغة عامة ومهارات التعلم مدى الحياة بصفة خاصة تمكن المتعلمين من مواصلة تعلمهم بغض النظر عن حدود الزمان والمكان، كما تتطلب توافر أربع ركائز أساسية وهي تعلم كيف تتعلم، تعلم كيف تعمل، تعلم كيف تعيش وتتعاش مع الآخرين، تعلم كيف تكون. ولتحقيق هذه المهارات وتنميتها لدى الطلاب يجب علينا كمعلمين- أن نساعدهم على التعلم الذاتي والتعلم القائم على المشروعات والتعلم القائم على التحدي. وتتضمن الورقة أيضا تعريف كل من هذه الإستراتيجيات وأهميتها وكيفية تضمينها في فصول تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطلاب المتخصصون في اللغة الإنجليزية – مهارات القرن الحادي والعشرين – التعلم مدى الحياة

Introduction

Nowadays, the teaching and learning process has become not only student-centered, but it should prepare students for 21st century skills as well. Students have become active learners who produce language not mere recipients of knowledge. They should confer with their teachers as well as their colleagues.

EFL students should be life-long learners whose learning is meaningful, constructive and continuous. Learning should take place at any time and everywhere. It is not restricted to a specific time or place. They should be inquisitive and researchers who search for knowledge from various resources.

Life-long learning requires that teachers prepare EFL students to learn –how-to learn and learn how to work (job or career skills). They should train students on how to communicate and how to be. EFL students should be autonomous, self-directed learners and risk –takers who solve problems and rely on research- and / or challenge –based learning.

What are 21st century skills?

Twenty-first century skills have been at the forefront of today’s educational debates. In contrast to the 20th century, the 21st century requires a new set of work, citizenship, and self-actualization skills in order to succeed. For this reason, educators must find new and innovative ways to develop skills within their students (Sabat *et al.*, 2015).

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills which is a path-breaking organization that supports incorporation of 21st century skills into a learning-created framework identifies four areas of skills: a) key subjects, b) learning and innovation skills, c) information, media and technology skills, and d) life and career skills. Learning and innovation skills are creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, and collaboration. They include brainstorming, developing new ideas, demonstrating creative thinking, planning, conducting research. They also encompass solving problems, making informed decisions, listening effectively, articulating thoughts and ideas and working with others. These all are

essential for reading lifelong learning and productivity.

Media and technology Skills are information literacy, media literacy, and ICT literacy. Information literacy requires such skills as to find, assess, use and manage knowledge; media literacy includes the skills to analyze and create media products; technology literacy includes knowing how to use technology effectively. Finally, life and Career Skills are flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility. Life and career skills include the criteria for evaluating the performances of employees according to these criteria (P21, 2015).

Educators should integrate these skills across all curricula as it is the responsibility of educators to prepare learners to have active roles both in work and life environments. It is crucial for students to learn 21st century literacy in order to be active users and “producers of their own social, cultural, and ideological materials” (Larson & Miller 2011).

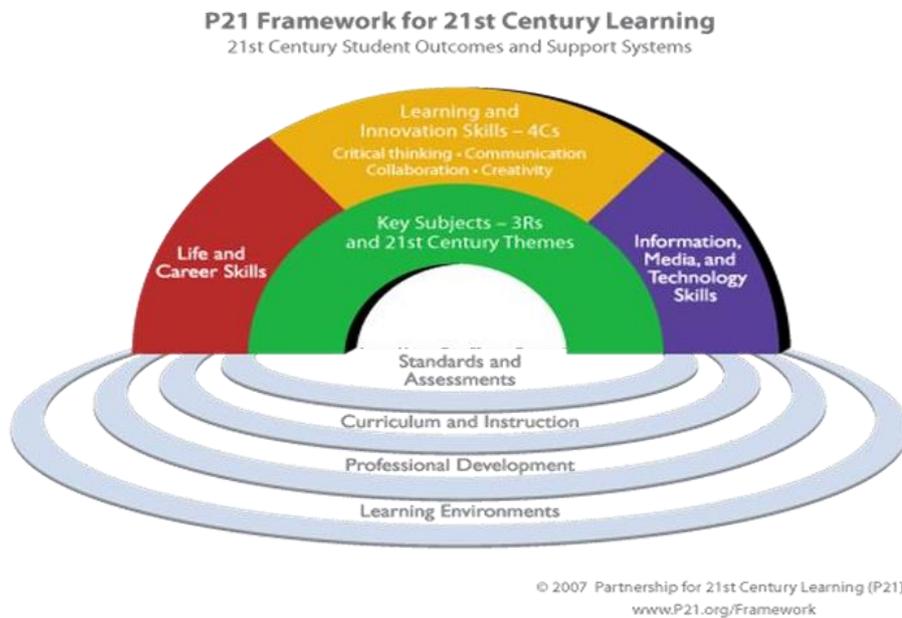
EFL Learners’ Autonomy

Autonomy is an essential characteristic for a good language learner especially for those who learn English as a foreign language and do not have the opportunity to hear or use the language in the real world. Therefore, it is their own responsibility to create and be in environments where the target language is used. Although language teachers or professional consultants may help the learner, he /

she should be responsible for his/ her own learning (Bayat 2008). "No matter what the teacher does or what the course book presents, ultimately it is the learner who does the learning.

The more learners are aware of how learning is best carried out, the better learning is likely to be" (Nation 1998).

Figure (1) Framework for 21st Century Skills



Source: P21, 2015

One of the leading goals of the research on second language teaching is an autonomous language learner. To be an autonomous learner is to have the ability to make decisions for one's own learning. They should have the ability to set goals, implement strategies to attain goals, identify relevant resources, and access personal progress (Aliponga *et al.*, 2011).

Autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self – management in learning. Precisely because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective. The effectiveness of the autonomous learner means

that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom. A meaningful concept of autonomy in learning must make reference to some broader concept of autonomy in life (Benson 2008).

Being autonomous learners do not necessarily mean that they study alone. It is possible to be an autonomous learner in a strongly teacher – led class, by deciding what should be given the greatest attention and effort, what should be looked at again outside class, how the material presented should be mentally processed, and how interaction with the teacher and others in the class should be carried out (Nation 1998).

EFL Learners and Project-Based Learning

One of fundamental learning theories that have been highly considered for the 21st century learning foundation is Constructivism. It is a philosophy of learning that the students' learning occurs when the new knowledge is presented in relation to the previous knowledge within an effective teaching environment. A wide variety of instructional activities claim to be based on constructivist learning theory. One of the applicable teaching and learning model which is based on constructivist learning theory is Project-Based Learning (**Karaduman & Gültekin 2007**).

Project-Based Learning Definition

Project-Based Learning is a learning model that focused on activities which attempt to produce learning products through project work. It is considered to be an approach to achieving the 21st century skills. 21st century education supports the concept of Four Cs in the classroom. The Four Cs include critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation. Project based learning potentially promotes these expected skills due to its learning activities (**National Education Association, 2014**).

Amissah (2019) defines Project-based learning as the practical acquisition of knowledge and skills through effective directions from an instructor and the response to feedback from students to solve real life issues through a group setting.

Project-based learning is a student-centered form of instruction which is based on three constructivist principles: learning is context-specific, learners are involved actively in the learning process and they achieve their goals through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge and understanding. It is considered to be a particular type of inquiry-based learning where the context of learning is provided through authentic questions and problems within real-world practices that lead to meaningful learning experiences (**Al-Balushi & Al-Aamri 2014**).

Project-Based Learning Importance

Project-based learning is one of the methods that provides students with the opportunity to take part in the learning environment allowing them to take the responsibility of their own learning, comprehend and structure information. In this method, students build up and direct their own learning, develop their creativity, prefer to solve problems they face and life is brought to the classroom. In brief, the project-based learning is a method based on students' working alone or in small groups with the aim of producing concrete products (**Bell 2010**).

It supports students in acquiring manual skills and learning more by performing original activities. It encourages students to make meaningful arguments and develop ways of solving real-world related issues. It is characterized by setting the students on edge to learn, with instructors serving as guides and motivating students to understand subjects by combining knowledge and

execution. Due to its characteristics, the thought of using of project-based learning environments is gradually becoming widespread especially in lessons where daily life is related more such as science and technology (**Baran & Maskan 2010**).

Project-based learning has many advantages. Firstly, it allows the learners work together with hands- on experience in an authentic and meaningful context. When the learner sees the language that can be used in their lives and is applicable to their task or need, they can develop their language skills and communicative competence and gain confidence, co-operation, imagination independence and self-discipline. Secondly, it builds on individual strengths, and allows individuals to explore their interests and ability moving away from rote learning and memorization. Finally, it provides students with opportunity to create a productive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere through the integration of students' knowledge, attitude, and skills (**Ralston 2016**).

Project-Based Learning in EFL Classes

The successful implementation of project-based learning in the classroom lies on the teacher's ability to effectively scaffold students' learning, motivate, support and guide them along the way. Effective scaffolded instruction within high-quality experiences will help reduce students' cognitive load, enable them to make small successful steps and ultimately achieve cognitive growth just beyond their reach. Project- based

learning enables teachers and students to work together to reflect upon the purpose of the project, set clear and realistic goals, and make decisions regarding the pace, sequencing and content of learning (**Bell 2010**).

Al-Balushi & Al-Aamri (2014) pointed out that there are six key recommendations for the successful adoption of a project-based learning approach in the classroom. They are as follows:

- **Student support:** students need to be effectively guided and supported; emphasis should be given on effective time management and student self-management including making safe and productive use of technological resources.
- **Teacher support:** regular support needs to be offered to teachers through regular networking and professional development opportunities.
- **Effective group work:** high quality group work will help ensure that students share equal levels of agency and participation.
- **Balance** between didactic instruction with independent inquiry method work will ensure that students develop a certain level of knowledge and skills before being comfortably engaged in independent work.
- **Assessment emphasis on reflection,** self and peer evaluation: evidence of progress needs to be regularly monitored and recorded.
- **An element of student choice** and autonomy throughout the project-based learning process

help students develop a sense of ownership and control over their learning.

Challenge Based Learning and EFL Learning

Challenge Based Learning Definition

According to **Apple Inc. (2011)**, Challenge Based Learning (CBL) is defined as a collaborative and hands on learning experience in which students are asked to work with peers, teachers and experts to develop deeper knowledge of the subjects they are studying. They can also identify and solve challenges, make a difference in their community, and share their results with the whole community.

Johson & Adams (2011) define CBL as a multidisciplinary approach to the learning process that supports students to leverage the technology, they use in their daily lives to solve real world challenges/problems. It gives students the opportunity to focus on a challenge of global significance and develop local solutions. It creates an educational atmosphere that encourages students to direct their own research and think critically and creatively about how to apply what they learn.

CBL can be described as extended problem-based learning, but it contains also some components from the experiential, project- based and decision- based learning perspectives (**Baloian et al., 2015**). It is an effective learning framework initiated at Apple, Inc. and used in various schools, universities, and institutions around the world. The framework is informed by

innovative ideas from media, recreation, technology, education, entertainment, workplace and society. It builds on the foundation of experiential learning and leans heavily on the wisdom of a long history of progressive ideas proving that learning can be deep, meaningful and purposeful. It aims to enable students to conduct research by integrating practices with theory and applying of knowledge and skills, such as collaboration and taking action in the community context (**Santos et al., 2018**).

Importance of CBL

Johson & Adams (2011) pointed out that CBL is important because it builds 21st century skills such as leadership, creativity, media literacy, problem solving, critical thinking and flexibility developing a framework for life-long learning. Also, it helps learners feel that they have learned more than what is required of them, and that they are part of solving a big problem, working harder than they normally do. Moreover, teachers find that it is effective in engaging students in learning, helping them master the material- and making good use of their limited time.

According to **Nichols et al. (2016)** CBL is helpful as it provides 1) a flexible and customizable framework that can be implemented as a guiding pedagogy or integrated with other progressive learning approaches, 2) a free and open system with no proprietary ideas, 3) a process that places all learners in charge, and responsible for the learning, 4) a focus on global ideas, meaningful challenges and the development of local and age

appropriate solutions, 5) an authentic relationship between academic disciplines and real world experiences, 6) a way to document and assess both the learning process and products and 7) an environment for deep reflection on the learning process.

This multidisciplinary approach is important as it encourages students to work collaboratively with their classmates, ask questions, develop a deeper understanding of the subject area and take actions in solving real-world problems. It works well when teachers from different disciplines work together. Teachers who have implemented CBL in teams report that collaboration with other teachers is one of the most beneficial and enjoyable aspects of this approach (Apple Inc, 2011).

Incorporating CBL in EFL Classrooms

CBL can be used in EFL classroom through implementing its three phases: engage, investigate and act. Each phase includes activities that prepare the learners to move to the next stage. The first phase includes big ideas, essential questioning and the challenge. Big ideas are broad concepts that are explored in multiple ways and are relevant to the learners and the larger community. Essential questioning allows the learners to personalize the big idea. Challenge turns the essential questions into a call to action by charging participants to learn about the subject and develop a solution.

Investigation, the second phase, comprises two elements: guiding questions and activities.

Guiding questions refer to the knowledge the learners will need to develop solutions to the guiding questions that will continue to emerge throughout the experience. Guiding activities and resources are used to answer the guiding questions developed by the learners.

Action, the third phase, includes three elements: evidence-based solutions, implementation and evaluation. Solution concepts emerge from the findings made during the investigation phase. The depth and breadth of the implementation of solutions depend on the age of the learners, the amount of time and resources available. Evaluation provides the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the solution and make adjustments (Apple Inc, 2011; Nichols *et al.*, 2016).

CBL proved to be effective in developing language skills. This is confirmed by the study of Ali (2019) that aimed at developing the academic speaking skills for university students by utilizing CBL strategy. Participants of the study were 70 university students from various majors, yet with the same English level. Results of the study showed that CBL strategy had a large effect size on developing university students' academic speaking skills and interactivity in academic context. She recommended with utilizing CBL strategy for developing academic writing skills.

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