The APPI eJournal

Year 15 | Autumn 2018

English language teaching and 21st century skills
The four Cs: not a soft option

Nicolas Hurst, Carla Diogo,
Catarina Abelha & Carolina Teixeira

As English teachers we sometimes simplify what we teach in class; for example, shall I do some 'grammar' today or some 'skills work'? However, we also need to take into account what we do in the classroom should also help to develop 21st century skills: a different kind of 'skills-based approach'.

Introduction

Today's foreign language teaching aspires to assist in the preparation of learners to undertake any career path of their choosing by giving them the necessary tools and develop the main skills required in our 21st century society, a society characterised as being subject to rapid transformations fuelled by digital technologies. In this context, 21st century skills are envisioned as being transversal and cross-curricular but further effort and improvements are required to embed this perspective/knowledge in educational systems (Cachia et al, 2010). The identity and nature of these skills has been brought to the attention of teachers in many subject areas including English language teaching (ELT), for example at the APPI conference in Lisbon in 2015. However, it remains true that "changes in theoretical understandings and in teacher training often do not filter down to the classroom and that change is context dependent to a very high degree" (Paran, 2012: 450). We should re-visit and re-focus important issues in ELT frequently in order to provide further opportunities for change to be embraced and especially so in the light of there being no single, recognised, legitimate 'methodology' available to ELT professionals: the 21st century for us is also the 'post-method' era (Akbari, 2008).

Since the advent of the 'Communicative Approach' in ELT in the late 1970s and 1980s, the focus of foreign language learning curricula, classroom procedures and teaching materials in Portugal has gradually shifted away from the previous more structural focus (Hurst, 2014). While this initial statement may be, in theory, true, a sizeable number of English language learners arrive at the Faculty of Letters in Porto (FLUP) with little experience of participating in authentic, communicative, outcome-focussed, language learning activities. For example, with respect to 'speaking', learners have to express their own meanings and manage their own conversations (communication) rather than working through tasks that require certain discourse markers or structural elements or language functions to be employed (Paran, 2012).

Communication

In relation to 21st century skills, the conception of 'communication' implies that learners must produce as much spoken and written English as possible. Learners should also be encouraged to recognise that differences exist between written and spoken forms of the target language (Hughes, 2010). In order to have more time for what are traditionally known as the 'productive skills' there needs to be a substantial shift away from spending most of class time dealing with stale reading texts and inconsequential reading comprehension questions or passively (not) absorbing lengthy grammar explanations. We also need to move away from the artificial distinction between 'receptive' and 'productive' skills and provide learning opportunities that contextualise and integrate multiple language skills (Hinkel, 2006). The emphasis in the literature nowadays is much more on 'noticing' and 'increasing awareness', for example when attending to distinctions between formal oral production (in FLUP lectures, for example!) and casual, conversational production.

When target language speaking occurs in the ELT classroom it can very often be characterised by the I-R-F paradigm (Initiation-Response-Feedback) where, in fact, very little real communication takes place and the whole exchange is under the control of the teacher. While it is understandable that the teacher wants to encourage her learners to participate, there are many other types of divergent exchanges that can be promoted or techniques that can be used, for example, a follow-up question instead of 'feedback' to which the teacher genuinely does not know the answer; teachers can also encourage 'off-book' casual interaction in the target language, highlighting the primal function of language as a social instrument. This approach may also be extended to additional casual interaction outside the context of the classroom itself, in the corridor or the cafeteria, for example.

Writing tasks in the 21st century ELT classroom need to break away from the focus on 'product' which somehow mirrors the model that the textbook inevitably provides and provide a varied range of opportunities for the learners to produce different texts for different purposes across a range of different genres. Here we also find the natural context for implementing a focus on grammar and vocabulary: "grammar and lexis are inextricable from meaning in written discourse and because L2 writers are ultimately evaluated based on their control of language and text construction in their written discourse" (Hinkel, 2006: 124). An explicit pedagogical approach to writing must include an understanding of 'communication' in an expansive sense rather than as the reproduction of a limited linguistic repertoire: writing tasks designed to practise specific grammar or lexical items. Tasks may initially be non-complex but should develop into opportunities for personal or emotive expression, for example, in narrative texts. Clearly there is strong connection with exposure to different reading texts but as a 'spark' for production rather than an object of analysis or a model to imitate. As mentioned above, in relation to 'noticing' and 'increasing awareness', reading texts may provide information about different registers, discourse features, genres and so on which can then be activated in productive, written tasks.

Collaboration

Teamwork is one of the important skills students are supposed to have nowadays to be successful in the world of work. To be successful, one is supposed to be able to get along with others, be agreeable, helpful and consequently collaborative. So, why do teachers avoid working collaboratively? Most of the time it is just because learners tend to get pretty noisy, they get easily off track and, most importantly of all, it is very difficult to assess this type of work.

To overcome these difficulties teachers should ensure that they form mixed ability groups where students have determined roles which will be really played by them but also frequently changed. Sapon-Shevin et al (2009) assert that one must work with diversity and not negotiate it. The groups should not comprise more than four students (for face to face interaction) and the objectives and procedures must be clearly established at the beginning. Even though group skills are relevant in this field we must not forget individual accountability, thus allowing students to maximize their potentialities but always in favour of the group.

Teachers must ensure that students work together, share responsibility fairly and make substantive decisions together. If this happens, what they produce is interdependent and they are working collaboratively and developing their social skills. They will not get off track if we challenge them, if we push them further than an easily 'googleable' question. Positive interdependence is the golden rule in collaboration: "Collaborative learning compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, has numerous benefits and typically results in higher achievement and greater productivity, more caring, supportive, and committed relationships; and greater psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem" (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012: 399).

Concerning assessment, the effective feedback should occur during the process while there is time to make changes. The main purpose is to increase quality and not judge quality which requires a shift away from the current emphasis on 'results' towards focussing more on the 'route'. Rubrics, self-assessment and peer reviews are all tools that can be used to provide the necessary feedback and allow teachers to feel confident with this mode of assessment. Learners should be made aware at the beginning of the task/project that the assessment will operate in function of them working collaboratively.

All this implies accepting a change in the role of the teacher since we will have learner-centred classes which require new approaches to assessment to classroom behaviours, including dispensing with traditional tests: teachers will be the monitors of learners' work. Much can be done within our subject area but it would gain much more importance if done in interdisciplinary projects where the content of two or three subjects can be worked in a collaborative way.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking, despite some arguments, is embodied in the entire foreign language teaching curriculum and should not be considered a separate and independent skill (Shirkhani and Fahim, 2011). The objective is to prepare learners to work cooperatively, to analyse and understand different perspectives, through activities, for example, based on problem-solving.

This goes far beyond the learning of linguistic structures acquired through repetitive exercises or the reproduction of a set of sentences provided in a textbook.

The inclusion of this particular skill in the curriculum has already been proven to be a means to improve learners' language learning by urging them to reflect upon links between languages (Bagheri, 2015). The global role of the English language, specifically as a tool to understand, analyse and question different issues and views, has been through many changes due to the ongoing political, economic, and social adjustments 21st century societies have recently endured. This perspective needs to be included within the implementation of different, more learner-centred methods and approaches which aim to make learners a living part of the language curriculum. As Mahyuddin et al argued (as cited in Shirkhani and Fahim, 2011: 112), learners who work on their critical thinking skills:

"(...) are capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum; capable of making decisions and solving problems; capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents; capable of treating thinking skills as lifelong skills; and finally intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually well-balanced."

Active participation in class and critical thinking can be related, encouraging learners to openly express their ideas and opinions during class is highly significant in terms of classroom procedures. An ongoing, more 'continual' approach to assessment, rather than final exams or tests, is again a pre-requisite providing more than one opportunity or moment, helps teachers to assess learners more fairly: "to test a larger range of knowledge and skills" (Shirkhani and Fahim, 2011: 113). In addition, promoting more interactive activities with a strong focus on critical thinking, such as debates or group projects, as opposed to gap-filling and rule memorisation tasks, could help learners' work on their self-confidence in order to participate at other times in class.

Furthermore, defining assessment tasks that enhance the role of critical thinking as well as promoting its development throughout varied language learning experiences will improve learners' 'acceptance' of the target language; they are less likely to view it as something 'foreign' or even 'alien'.

Creativity

Creativity is the skill that allows learners to think outside of the box and also to put a little part of themselves into the something they are working on. Promoting creativity can assist in attaining the affective and cognitive engagement that is essential for language acquisition along with helping learners to understand language used for natural communication and to use language for effective communication themselves (Tomlinson, 2015). It is, thus, important

for teachers to try and create opportunities for leaners to be creative. Both teachers and learners have to be open to variety and having a playful attitude.

Nevertheless, learners do not get creative in the classroom on their own as creativity also applies to teachers. Teachers are responsible for promoting a setting for learners to develop their language skills in a creative manner, which may occur through more varied, learner-centred classroom activities and adapted tasks from textbooks or even learner produced materials. It should be noted that, in general, textbooks are lacking when it comes to fostering creativity. It then becomes the teacher's role to be innovative and adapt learning materials when it comes to encouraging learners to engage with the target language. The teacher should also act as a role model. It is important for teachers to demonstrate their creative ability in order to pave the way for learners to follow their lead and encourage them to explore their unlimited imagination.

Learners seem to be most creative when working collectively. As they are working together, learners are more likely to be more imaginative as everyone thinks about different things: the sharing of ideas invariably leads to the production of yet more ideas. Teachers may also get their learners to aid them in making the classroom an interactive place by asking them to create game-like activities and showcasing them to the class. Therefore, both teachers and learners are working towards a more creative language learning environment.

However, creativity is not always a synonym for something brand new. More often than not, it is about doing things differently. Therefore, creative acts should be recognized and accepted within the domain in which they occur (Maley & Peachey, 2015). Creativity is also not a synonym for 'chaos'; teachers should also be responsible for providing the limits within which creativity actually blossoms more easily. Learners work better when they have a clear understanding of what the task requires: "assignments that are too open-ended will become overwhelming and ineffective. Teachers should set helpful boundaries within which to innovate, according to the learning outcome they hope to accomplish" (Bialik & Fadel, 2015: 7).

Conclusion

This 21st century perspective on the way we work as teachers will not be the panacea for all the problems schools are facing, but it certainly provides a good framework to reshape classroom procedures and a focus for the renewal of national curricula. The development of the four Cs – communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity – has the power to transform ELT and change the way teachers to unlock our learners' true potential in today's global society: to assist our learners to develop as 'whole persons' who have life-long needs/capabilities. A new focus in the ELT classroom might also become the catalyst for new insights in the teaching what has traditionally been denominated 'a skills-based approach, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening (Paran, 2012). So, despite our heavy timetables, overloaded curricula and over-crowded classrooms, ELT professionals in Portugal should embrace a teaching-learning culture that allows them to take risks and innovate with the knowledge that many successful 'experiments' have been conducted around the world (see for example, the ATCS project in Australia or the P21 project in the USA) and there is a wealth of support in the academic literature.

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N Hurst (APPI-B-1415), Nicolas Hurst is Assistant Professor in English Studies. PhD in Anglo-American Studies (University of Porto, 2014). Teacher and teacher trainer. Numerous articles published in Portugal and abroad. Regular speaker at local and international conferences. ELT coursebook consultant.

Carla Diogo. (APPI-B-5186). Teacher of English since 1998. Currently working at the Escola Profissional Bento de Jesus Caraça with students of English on professional courses. Second year student on the MA in Teaching English in the 3rd Cycle of Basic Education and Secondary Education (University of Porto). Interests include using game-like activities.

Carolina Teixeira. Second-year student on the MA in Teaching English in the 3rd cycle of Basic Education and in Secondary Education. BA in Languages, Literatures and Cultures with a major in English (University of Porto, 2017). Interests include CLIL and other new approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Catarina Abelha. Second-year student on the MA in Teaching English in the 3rd cycle of Basic Education and in Secondary Education at the University of Porto. MA in Anglo-American Studies: Literature and Culture (University of Porto, 2015). Currently works as an English tutor. Interests include English Literature and Intercultural Education.