Integrating the 21st Century Skills into the Business English Classroom

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Abstract: *In a globalized world, characterized by the interdependence of the world's economies, cultures and populations and therefore requiring a shared means of communication, English has obtained the status of the lingua franca in both academic and business contexts and it has been extensively used in scientific, economic and political fields. Consequently, English has become essential for the entire workforce whose career prospects on the labor market are largely dependent on their English language proficiency, the ability to communicate effectively and overcome language and cultural barriers.*

Being spoken by over one billion people, English is used in a wide range of settings such as international business, diplomacy, science, technology, education, travel and entertainment. The status of English as an international language and its impact on the improvement of career prospects have resulted in enormous development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), an approach primarily focusing on developing learners' communicative competence in specific professional fields such as business and economics, science, medicine, technology, tourism, social studies, etc. Business English (BE), as a branch of ESP, implies teaching specialized vocabulary and different skills enabling learners to effectively communicate in a business environment.

However, major technological and scientific advances in the last few decades and the age of the knowledge-based economy in which we now live have caused society and the business environment to be changing rapidly. As a result, employers are looking for skills that go beyond academic qualifications and work experience, and match the requirements of the current age. These skills, variously labeled and frequently referred to as the 21st-century skills, comprise communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, creativity and innovation, decision making, digital literacy, leadership, etc.

The aim of this paper is to explore how the 21st-century skills can be integrated and developed in the Business English classroom at tertiary education level since the traditionally taught skills such as giving opinions, negotiating, participating in meetings, reporting, making arrangements, telephoning and socializing in business contexts, no longer seem to meet the requirements of the current age and the contemporary labor market. Business English courses at the university level can significantly contribute to developing these skills and thus prepare students for their future careers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world has changed fundamentally in the last few decades. Globalization, digitalization and other social and economic changes have caused society in general and business environment to be changing rapidly. Consequently, the world of work is constantly changing. Information and communication technologies are thoroughly reshaping ways of doing business as well as other aspects of society. One of the prominent driving forces in today's global operating environment is the trend towards increasing mobility (Varis, 2007, p. 18). As a result, experts can be recruited from anywhere in the world, which imposes the need for knowledge workers of the 21st century to be competitive in the global market in terms of their knowledge, skills and competencies. Today's knowledge work is done collaboratively in teams whose members

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frequently work across national borders, using a huge variety of digital devices and advanced technologies (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 24) in order to create and innovate new products and services and meet the needs of customers and market demands of the 21st century.

Traditional education, primarily focused on acquiring content knowledge, falls short of the 21st century market and workplace requirements, as has been indicated by a number of studies. According to an in-depth study surveying over 400 employers across the United States (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006), college and university graduates in the US are lacking in skills such as oral and written communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, information technology application, leadership and creativity (pp. 34-35). Similar results were obtained by a number of surveys in the UK, where employers "continue to highlight difficulty in recruiting young adults with the necessary skills" (Fettes, 2018, p. 12). In a survey by the British Chambers of Commerce (2014), 54% of firms surveyed felt that university graduates were unprepared for work, mostly due to a lack of work experience (76%) and soft skills such as communication and team working (57%). Out of five hundred SMEs participating in a survey by the Ernst & Young Foundation in 2017, about 50% of firms believed young people did not have core, non-technical skills upon completing their education (Fettes, 2018, p. 12). Although young adults are collectively more qualified than ever in terms of the educational cycles behind them, they are facing struggles to succeed in the labor market due to its complexity, increased competition and the changing requirements of employers (Mann et al., 2017, p. 4). These findings clearly suggest that educational institutions are failing to adequately prepare young people for work as they are not providing and teaching them the skills needed in the workplace, and that the dynamic 21st century labor market require a new set of skills to be acquired and developed.

2. 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Findings from the literature review suggest that employers are looking for skills that go beyond content knowledge, academic qualifications and work experience, and that there has been a long history of identifying skills required to perform well in the workplace. However, regardless of numerous attempts to produce one agreed upon list of such skills, the definitive list is still missing. Moreover, these skills are variously labeled and referred to as common, core, essential, intercultural, personal, social, soft, 21st century, employability, transferrable skills, etc. Many educational institutions, different initiatives, policymakers and academic experts have attempted to develop frameworks for defining 21st century skills and propose strategies for integrating them into the educational system.

One of such attempts is the OECD's *The Future of Education and Skills 2030* project. Besides recognizing the need for both broad and specialized knowledge, the framework also defines a broad range of skills, including cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (such as critical and creative thinking, and learning to learn), social and emotional skills (such as collaboration and empathy), and physical and practical skills (such as using new information and communication technology devices). This broad range of knowledge and skills is to be mediated by attitudes and values such as motivation, trust and respect for diversity, and accompanied by "transformative competencies", such as creativity, curiosity, adaptability, open-mindedness, ability to reconcile tensions and dilemmas, and responsibility and self-regulation (OECD, 2018, pp. 3-6).

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) has developed a unified vision for learning known as the Framework for 21st Century Learning (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning,

2016, p. 1). The framework describes the skills, knowledge and expertise students need to master in order to thrive in today's global economy in a world of constant change. It proposes learning through traditional key subjects and interdisciplinary 21st century themes integrated into key subjects (such as global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy, health literacy, and environmental literacy), Recognizing the first two components of the learning framework as insufficient for success, the Partnership emphasizes the importance of the third component – 21st century skills, arguing that in order to provide students with essential skills for success in today's world, educational institutions must also teach "21st century skills discretely in the context of key subjects and 21st century interdisciplinary themes" (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015, p. 8). These skills are grouped into three sets – learning and innovation skills, information, media and technology skills, and life and career skills. Learning and innovations skills include creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration skills. Information, media and technology skills comprise the ability to access, evaluate and use information, to create and analyze media products, and to effectively apply technology, while life and career skills include flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility. The framework also highlights the importance of underpinning teaching of 21st century skills by four essential support systems – suitability of assessment approaches, curriculum and instruction, teacher professional development, and learning environments – with a view to achieving the best possible learning outcomes (ibid., p. 7).

The Commercial Education Trust (CET) explored the gap between the skills young people develop in education and employer demands. In 2016-2017 they conducted a study to identify the types of skills commonly recognized as important in the workplace, and how educational programs can develop these skills and the know-how necessary for young adults to succeed at work and facilitate "education-to-work transitions" (Fettes, 2018, p. 9). The study results indicate that "soft skills" such as active listening, communication and presentation skills, teamwork and problem solving skills are deemed essential in the recruitment process. They are followed by qualities such as confidence, ambition and resilience, and attributes including decision making skills, negotiation skills, creativity, curiosity, reliability and professional attitude (ibid., pp. 24-27).

In a similar vein, the World Economic Forum (2016) reports that "ability to work with data and make data-based decisions will become increasingly vital across many job families", while "overall, social skills will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills", and "many formerly purely technical occupations are expected to show a new demand for creative and personal skills." (pp. 21-24). The report's analysis of skills focuses on a set of 35 widely used work-relevant skills and abilities most frequently cited across all occupations in the O*NET database, where skills such as communication, creativity, ICT literacy, critical thinking and problem solving, negotiation and persuasion are highly ranked (World Economic Forum, 2016, pp. 51-52).

Another conceptual model providing a framework to define the skills required to thrive in today's digital age has been created by the North Central Regional Educational Library (NCREL) and the Metiri Group (Lemke, 2003). Recognizing that "yesterday's education is not sufficient for today's learner" and that "information and communication technologies are raising the bar on the competencies needed to succeed in the 21st century" (ibid., pp. 4-5), the framework identifies four groups of skills: digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication and high productivity. The first group of skills includes technological literacy and language proficiency using a variety of conventional and technology-based media to access, manage,

create, and critically evaluate information, as well as the ability to recognize and appreciate the diversity of cultures. Inventive thinking refers to the ability to adapt to be better suited to current and future environments, to creatively solve problems, to maintain curiosity and take risks, and to apply critical thinking to a range of problem-solving contexts. Effective communication includes the ability to cooperate and effectively communicate using a wide range of media and technology in order to solve problems and create new products, and to accept responsibility for group work towards set goals. Finally, high productivity comprises the abilities to prioritize, plan and manage to achieve goals, while showing positive leadership traits and effectively using contemporary technology tools (Lemke, 2002, pp. 11-24).

Based on all presented frameworks for defining the skills required to successfully perform jobs in the 21st century, it can be concluded that the concept of skills is used in many different ways and a widely agreed and shared list of these essential skills does not exist. However, the frameworks presented are largely consistent with each other in that they emphasize the complex role and task of education today and the necessity to integrate 21st century skills into the education model, which is crucial in preparing today's students for tomorrow's jobs. To achieve this, education providers have to shift from preparing students for specific careers to developing skills that are transferable across occupations and industries.

3. ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AND BUSINESS ENGLISH

Tremendous changes and progress in science and technology, the development of the world's economy as well as internalization of higher education in the period after the Second World War imposed the need for an international language and this role was assigned to English, the world's *lingua franca* of science, technology and business (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 6). As a result of increased mobility of workforce, English became an indispensable business tool. This created demand for teaching English tailored to the needs of learners instead of traditionally focusing on teaching language forms, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged as a response to this demand.

According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), the main purpose of ESP is to meet specific needs of learners and enable them to meet their professional or vocational demands by focusing on the language, skills and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to conduct in English. They also point out that ESP is usually aimed at intermediate or advanced learners, either professionals or tertiary-level students (pp. 4-5). Originally, the primary purpose of teaching ESP was to enable students to communicate internationally in areas such as commerce and technology (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013, p. 2). However, with the increased spread of cross-cultural communication, the ESP field has expanded to include other areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for medical purposes (EMP), to name a few.

Business English or English for Business Purposes differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is a mix of general content, in terms of language forms and general ability to communicate effectively, and specific or professional content related to a particular job area or industry (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 3; Brieger, 1997, p. 6-7). A major impact on Business English teaching has been made by the recognition of the need for business people to be proficient not only in specialist vocabulary but also in business communication skills (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 5).

Business English is thus aimed at learners who need to use English effectively in a variety of real-life communicative situations within working environment. Numerous studies have investigated the scope of these communicative situations in order to define the needs of companies and business professionals. Their findings have highlighted the importance of the following communicative situations or needs: making phone calls, writing emails and reports, giving presentations, participating in meetings, communication with foreign headquarters and subsidiaries, reading technical manuals, business travelling, using English in online conferences and meetings, and negotiating with suppliers (Strapasson, 2015, pp. 39-41).

4.   21ST CENTURY SKILLS IN THE BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Based on presented internationally recognized frameworks for defining the skills required to improve employability and ensure success in the 21st century workplace, and their emphasis on communication, collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking, intercultural competence, and information technology skills as essential, the ELT classroom in general and Business English classroom in particular seem to be particularly suited to the development of 21st century skills. This is largely due to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has been the prevalent approach to teaching languages in the last few decades. According to Richards (2006, p. 3), the goal of CLT is communicative competence, which refers to the ability to engage in purposeful communication and adapt the use of language to the setting and participants, as well as the ability to produce and understand different types of texts such as reports, interviews, narratives, etc. These abilities, which are nowadays the focus of the English language classroom, are very important aspects of communication in working environment. Moreover, communication taught in the English language classroom draws on and enables development of other important 21st century skills such as teamwork, perspective-switching, empathy and intercultural competence (Mercer et al., 2019, p. 8).

The Business English classroom is even more compatible with the development of 21st century skills than the General English classroom as Business English courses are aimed at two groups of learners (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Brieger, 1997, Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), pre-experience learners, usually tertiary-level students preparing for careers in different areas of business, and job-experienced learners who already have some business knowledge and skills. To prepare students not only to communicate effectively in the workplace but also to develop other skills recognized as essential, and teamwork skills in particular, it is vital that students are not asked to work individually on assignments focusing on memorization of content in terms of grammatical forms and vocabulary (Chang & Tung, 2009). Instead, the emphasis should be put on pair and group communicative activities. The Business English classroom should therefore provide a lot of opportunities for purposeful communication. This means that language, both spoken and written, is used to achieve a goal – for example, to make a reservation or an appointment, to order goods and reply to an order, to complain about faulty products and respond to a complaint, to negotiate a price and terms of payment, to welcome foreign visitors and engage in small talk with them. All these activities and tasks reflect authentic communicative situations which occur within real working environment. As a lot of business transactions nowadays are conducted across national borders, the Business English classroom should also focus on language and communication style adequate to business exchanges with co-workers and partners from different cultures. It should therefore replicate the real business environment through simulations in which students will play their future real-life roles and thus prepare them to meet the workplace requirements in terms of communication and teamwork skills, as well as intercultural competence.

The skills in the Business English classroom cannot be practiced and developed in isolation, independently of one another. An approach that creates opportunities for integrating and developing a wide range of 21st century skills is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). A task can be defined as an activity in which learners use given information and the target language for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome (Prabhu, as cited in Yildiz, 2020, p. 72; Willis, 1996, p. 23). To be valid for the purpose of this approach, tasks must be realistic, reflecting real-world business situations, and have a clear outcome. They contain at least two elements: input data, which may be provided by course materials, teachers or students, and initiating question or a problem which instructs students on what they are to do with the data (Wright, as cited in Nunan, 1989, p. 47). With certain tasks, a variety of outcomes might be possible. Input data may take the form of newspaper or magazine articles, press releases, web pages, curriculum vitae, job advertisements, letters, invoices, reports, economic graphs, videos, survey results, and so on. One of instructive methods within this approach is a role play. Role plays provide students with "an opportunity to practice communication in different social contexts and different social roles" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 134). For example, the teacher provides background information and the setting – who the students are, what the situation is, and what they are talking about – but the students decide what they will say, what language forms they will use in order to communicate effectively in the given situation, how they will handle the situation if problems arise and how these problems can be solved, and what the final outcome of the communicative activity is. Role plays mirror real-world business situations such as telephoning, business meetings and negotiations, socializing with business contacts, and offer opportunities not only to acquire language forms commonly used in these situations and communication skills, but also to develop teamwork, problem solving and decision making, negotiation and persuasion skills, as well as perspective-switching and empathy.

Another approach that can enhance students' 21st century skills is Project-Based Learning (PBL). Projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in problem solving and decision making activities, give them the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and result in realistic products or presentations (Thomas, 2000, p. 1). PBL requires students to work collaboratively to plan, organize, negotiate, and reach a consensus on issues such as what tasks to perform, who will be responsible for each task and how information will be researched and presented (Muslim et al., 2017, p. 42).

For example, students might be presented a reading passage (a newspaper or magazine article) or a video recording on shopping habits and problems faced by traditional shop owners due to increased online shopping, and asked to investigate attitudes to online shopping and make recommendations to shop owners on how to solve the problem and increase sales. After this initial stage, students in teams could be asked to investigate consumer preferences in terms of in-store and online shopping and reasons for these preferences by using a survey. Each team would have to create the survey autonomously, process the obtained data, and present their findings and recommendations to shop owners using presentation software. The overall activity would extend over a longer period of time and might involve a certain amount of work outside the classroom. In order to work effectively, each team might decide to appoint a team leader who would plan activities, chair discussions, and allocate duties and set deadlines. This would enable the development of leadership skills, "the ability to use interpersonal and problem-solving skills to influence and guide others toward a goal, and inspire others to reach their best" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 85). At the same time, students would build their responsibility skills by acting responsibly in order to solve the problem and achieve an outcome, as well as planning and organization skills, the ability to estimate time and organize efficiently to achieve goals (Lemke, 2002, p. 23)

In order to create the survey, students would have to apply a variety of skills. First of all, they might recognize the survey as a problem that needs to be solved. During the group discussion, they would need to apply problem-solving and critical thinking skills to identify the most suitable form of survey, and choose between a paper-based and an online survey by comparing their advantages and disadvantages. If an online survey is chosen, students would practice their information and communication technology (ICT) skills, for example by using Google Surveys, a web-based application, to create the survey. This would have a positive effect on students' motivation as today's students are "digital natives" who want and expect information and communication technologies to be integrated into their learning (Trilling & Fadel, p. 30). Next, they would need to discuss and decide on the survey sample size and structure to ensure the survey reliability and diversity of the sample (for example, the number of respondents, age groups, gender and levels of education). To do so, they could apply the knowledge acquired in other college or university courses such as Statistics or Quantitative Methods, or use Internet sources. At this stage or earlier, they would probably recognize the need to solve the problem of the survey language. Their ICT skills would need to be applied and perhaps improved in order to enable respondents who do not speak English to participate in the survey by providing the option to change the survey language from English into their mother tongue.

Further, they would have to consider adequate survey questions, either by applying their marketing knowledge or by using Internet sources (for example, various texts or videos on good survey questions), or both. The rapidly evolving digital environment has made a huge amount of unfiltered information available at the touch of a button. Quantity, however, does not equal quality. Whenever they rely on Internet sources, students will have to use their critical thinking skills, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and synthesize information in order to form opinions with relevant and valid information (ibid., p. 51). After that, during the group discussion, students would create the survey by formulating the questions. This stage of the activity would involve teamwork and communication skills – sharing information and ideas, helping each other, listening attentively, expressing agreement and disagreement, negotiating or compromising trying to reach consensus if their ideas conflict, and applying writing skills.

After administering the online survey, in the group discussion, students would again use their communication and critical thinking, as well as problem solving skills, to analyze the obtained survey data, come up with ideas, propose solutions to the problem shop owners are facing, and reach consensus on recommendations they can make with regard to adapting to consumer needs and increasing sales. Another important skill that would be applied at this stage is students' creativity, the ability to think flexibly to generate new ideas and solutions to problems, which is very high on the list of 21st century skills as there is a constant demand to offer new services, better processes and improved products (ibid., p. 56). Creativity, combined with language and ICT skills, would be further developed in the process of designing the final presentation using presentation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint. Finally, students' knowledge of appropriate language forms, and communication and presentation skills would be practiced and improved by rehearsing and delivering the presentation. Since the whole activity and the task completion would extend over a longer period, for example a few weeks, and considerable amount of work would be done outside the classroom due to the constraints imposed by curriculum and lesson plans, part of group discussions could be held virtually, by using video conferencing platforms or services such as Zoom or Google Meet, which would further enhance students' ICT skills.

Having analyzed two approaches that can be applied to Business English instruction, it can be concluded that, by placing an emphasis on students' needs and authentic materials and real-world business situations and tasks, the Business English classroom can significantly contribute to the development of a wide range of 21st century skills, particularly communication, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking, information and communication technology, creativity, responsibility and leadership skills, all of which are highly ranked and recognized as essential to improved employability and success in the digital age.

5. CONCLUSION

In today's globalized world characterized by digitalization, knowledge work, global markets and increasing mobility of goods, workforce, money and cultures across national borders, as well as increasing interaction and cooperation, and rapidly changing requirements of the labor market, the role of education has become of vital importance. Acquisition of content knowledge does not guarantee employability and success in the 21st century labor market and workplace. A new set of skills analyzed and defined by various educational institutions, higher education policymakers and academic experts is required for graduates to be marketable and employable in the digital age. Strong recommendations have been made to education providers to engage with employers in order to optimize graduates' chances of success in the recruitment process, as well as to encourage and support teacher professional development, so they can adequately respond to the new requirements on educational institutions and teaching process. The Business English classroom is particularly suitable for the development of the skills recognized as essential employability skills. By placing emphasis on students' needs, authentic materials and utilization of information and communication technologies, and enabling them to collaborate and engage in authentic communication mirroring the real-world business situations, it provides an ideal setting for the development of the skills vital for employment, promotion prospects and successful performance in the 21st century workplace.

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