

Teaching 21st-Century Skills in the EFL Classroom From Saudi EFL Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The 21st-century language classroom goes beyond simply teaching and learning grammar and vocabulary. This study explored EFL teachers' perceptions of integrating 21st-century skills into their classrooms. This study adopted survey research. The sample of the study consisted of (49) teachers who were teaching at the secondary school level in Najran City, Saudi Arabia, during the academic year 2023-2024. The findings showed that EFL teachers are aware of these skills and practice them to a moderate extent in their teaching contexts. Additionally, results indicated that a high percentage of EFL teachers use technology as a tool for learning in their classrooms. Based on statistical analysis, there are no significant differences between the means of the participants' responses attributed to the two variables: years of experience and educational qualification.

Keywords: Professional Development, 21st-Century Skills, EFL Saudi Teachers

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Introduction

Education is essential in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable people to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future. Education needs to aim to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible, and engaged citizens.

The 21st century demands the explicit integration of learning strategies, digital competencies, and career abilities. Handayani (2017) stated that school education is no longer about a traditional classroom where teachers as the only source of knowledge, on the contrary, students should be equipped with 21st-century skills for a successful future. According to Ledward and Hirata (2011), 21st-century skills are a blend of content knowledge, specific skills, expertise, and literacies necessary to succeed in work and life.

Foreign language (FL) education in the 21st-century needs to adapt to the evolving needs of students to prepare them effectively for functioning in the modern world. The ways we learn, teach languages, and communicate have radically changed due to globalization and digitization (Fandino, 2013; Faulkner & Latham, 2016). In other words, a key element of successful change is 21st-century education that focuses less on knowledge and emphasizes improving the quality of teaching and learning processes.

English cannot be treated as a simple linguistic skill. Instead, English should be regarded as a global language that people can use to express their local identities and to communicate intelligibly with the world (Crystal, 2006). As a consequence of this new perspective, Eaton (2010) states that today's EFL classroom should no longer be focused on grammar, memorization and learning from rote. Rather, it should be conceived of as a space to learn to use language and cultural knowledge as a means to connect to others around the world.

Schools, especially EFL classrooms, should offer students opportunities to develop creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, self-direction, and cross-cultural skills. There is a consensus that there exists a significant contrast between the skills taught to students in schools and those required for life and work in today's knowledge-based society. The current English language curriculum is no longer deemed sufficient to adequately prepare students for the rapidly evolving world of technology (Alemi & Daftarifard, 2010).

In today's context, it is pivotal for teachers to play a crucial role in developing citizens with the 21st-century skills mentioned above for a well-functioning society. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, in particular, have a responsibility to incorporate these skills into their lessons, as English has evolved into the language for international and even national communication. Unlike in the past, language learners are now required to use the language for more complex purposes, such as international communication and collaboration, presenting complex ideas, and interpreting fast-changing information (Pardede, 2012). Hence, teachers in the 21st century should possess the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for both their careers and society. Saavedra and Opfer (2012) argued that teachers need to have 21st-century skills themselves to be able to teach such skills, manage effective teaching and learning practices, and help students apply the knowledge they acquire in their daily lives.

Previous studies have shown that teacher competence in 21st-century skills is crucial for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Amr, 2020; Aristiawan & Herman, 2021;

Paschal & Gougou, 2022). However, there is still insufficient specific research on 21st-century skills among EFL teachers (Alamri, 2020; Alghamdi, 2022). These findings suggest the need for further studies on 21st-century education in Saudi Arabia, particularly in EFL contexts.

Statement of the Problem

There is growing concern among academics, employers, and educators about whether the skills being taught today are relevant for individual and social development, and whether educational institutions can keep up with the demands of the changing world. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to have strong competencies in translating 21st century skills to students through a more systematic teaching process.

In Saudi Arabia, there is an increasing emphasis on 21st-century skills-based teaching among educators, including teachers and school administrators. The Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (MOE) has made various efforts to help teachers integrate 21st-century skills into their teaching. This is aimed at improving the educational process, educational outcomes, and creating alignment between students' qualifications and the requirements of the modern job market.

Since 21st-century skills are a new addition to the Saudi education system, there have been few studies on this topic. According to these studies (Halvorsen, 2018; Albahlal, 2019; Alharbi, 2022; Alowayyid, 2023), one common obstacle to integrating these skills in language classrooms is that language teachers might not have a clear understanding of what 21st-century skills include and how they are taught alongside the other language skills. Therefore, the current study aims to determine to what extent English language teachers in secondary schools integrate 21st-century skills into their classes.

Research Questions

This research aims to address the following questions:

- To what extent do secondary school EFL teachers integrate 21st-century skills into their classrooms?
- Are there statistically significant differences, at a significance level of 0.05, between the means of EFL teachers' responses regarding their teaching practices as influenced by variables such as years of experience, educational qualification, and training on 21st-century skills?

Literature Review

The curriculum-based, discipline-focused, and teacher-centered classical education approaches of the 20th century have been replaced by student-centered approaches. These new approaches emphasize lifelong skills and take into account each student's differences. One of the most important approaches is constructivism, which has been influenced by scholars and scientists such as Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Glasersfeld in the 21st century (Sirin, 2008).

Constructivism is a cognitive learning approach that is based on the idea of reconstructing one's mind. According to this approach, knowledge is transferred, prior knowledge is reinterpreted, and new knowledge is created (Erdem & Demirel, 2002). In this context,

project-based learning (PBL) can facilitate this process, offering new opportunities for teachers and students to develop and enhance their skills (Basbay, 2010). Baysura et al. (2016) define project-based learning as an instructional strategy that helps students acquire new skills while exploring real-world issues, creating original works, and preparing their own courses and performances. PBL also aids students in developing their subject-matter knowledge, problem-solving abilities, and self-directed learning.

21st-century pedagogy is a broad concept that describes the methods, techniques, practices, and skills needed for an effective teaching approach. It is multi-dimensional because it recognizes the diverse and evolving needs of learners, teachers, and society (Johnson, 2019). This fact is underlined by the diagram below (Paschal & Gougou, 2022).

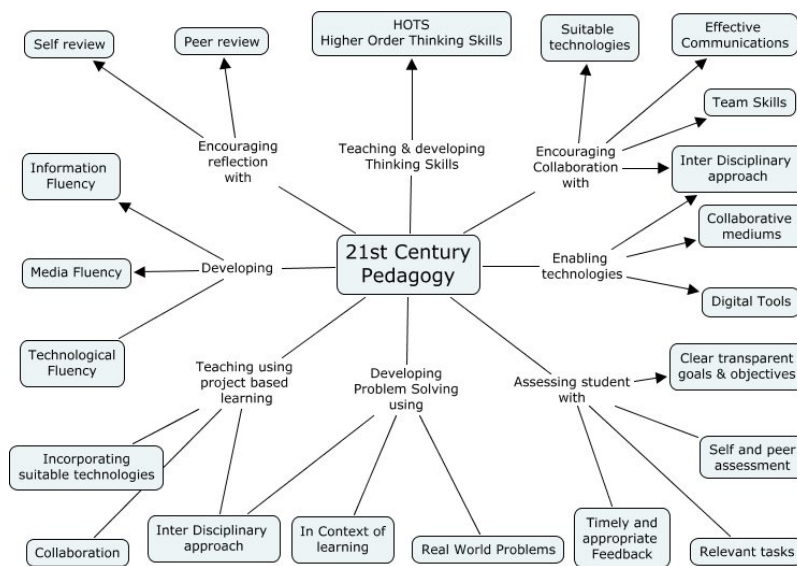


Figure1. A Diagram of 21st Century Pedagogy

Educational planners, theoreticians, and researchers worldwide have been working on developing frameworks for necessary skills for 21st-century students to succeed in both local and global societies. Several frameworks have been created, including the Partnership for 21st-Century Skills (P21) in 2006, the EnGauge Framework in 2003, the Assessment and Teaching of 21st-Century Skills Framework (ATC21S) in 2010, and the Cambridge Life Competencies framework in 2018. These frameworks are key tools for educators, teachers, and researchers to address questions about 21st-century innovation and learning skills, such as what to do, how to implement, and when to apply (Eker & Bedir, 2023).

Idrizi (2022) argues that in 21st-century language classrooms, teaching grammar and vocabulary is no longer enough. In addition to these language skills, learners must also develop essential competencies and skills crucial for the modern era. These skills, referred to as 21st-century skills, include critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity.

As stated by Eaton (2010), the main focus in EFL classrooms today should not be on grammar, memorization, and rote learning. Instead, they should be seen as environments where students can learn to use their language and cultural background to communicate with people from around the world. A more technologically advanced, learner-centered, and collaborative approach is more appropriate. Teachers can benefit from new and innovative frameworks and techniques as part of this reconceptualization of the EFL classroom. With technology becoming increasingly common in the twenty-first century, there has been a

significant increase. In order to succeed in the twenty-first century, Harshbarger (2016) suggests several essential elements. One of these is explicit teaching. Teachers must have a thorough understanding of noncognitive components such as academic mindsets, behaviors, perseverance, social skills, and learning strategies. Additionally, they must provide students with clear instructions on how to improve their 4Cs (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) within the context of a globalized society.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of incorporating 21st-century skills into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. For example, a study conducted by Fandino (2013) aimed to encourage Colombian EFL teachers to integrate 21st Century Skills into their teaching practices. The results indicated that teachers should critically analyze what the 21st-century movement offers in order to enhance their teaching methods. Similarly, Albahlal (2019) examined the integration of 21st-century skills into English language learning within an EFL context. The findings emphasized the significance of 21st-century skills in educational systems, particularly in the domain of English language learning.

In a study conducted by Alamri (2020), it was found that female EFL students in Saudi Arabia had a positive opinion of their teachers' application of 21st-century skills. Another study by Amr (2020) looked into the incorporation of 21st-century skills into the 12th-grade Palestinian curriculum and found that English for Palestine 12 tends to reduce the importance of incorporating these skills. Aristiawan & Herman (2021) aimed to investigate the methods used by EFL teachers to apply the 21st-century skills included in the 2013 curriculum, revealing that teachers' poor application of these skills presents a challenge. Furthermore, Paschal & Gougou (2022) studied English teachers' experiences in Ivory Coast using 21st-century skills in ELT, and the results showed that teachers' practices were being positively influenced by 21st-century pedagogy, leading to increased learning engagement.

Method

According to Soland et al. (2013), measuring 21st century competencies can be carried out through surveys. Therefore, this study adopted survey research.

Participants

The participants of this study were 49 EFL male teachers working in public secondary schools in Najran city, Saudi Arabia, during the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. The demographic background of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Background of the Participants

Variables		F	%
Educational Qualification	Bachelor and less	38	77.6
	Higher studies MA/PhD	11	22.4
Training on 21 st - century skills	Yes	43	87.8
	No	6	12.2
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	13	26.5
	From 5 to 10 years	14	28.6
	More than 10 years	22	44.9
Total		49	100

Instrument

A questionnaire developed by Hixson et al. (2012) to measure 21st century skills was used. The study instrument has a high degree of reliability, improving on reliable measures from previous studies (std. alpha > .90, inter-item correlations > .58). The survey questionnaire comprises 48 items divided into eight categories measuring teachers' 21st century skill practices. Each category has two parts. The first part presents the definition of the related 21st century skill. In the second part, there are 5-point Likert scale items scored from 1 'Almost never' to 5 'Almost daily'.

Data Analysis

The statistical software (SPSS) version (23) was used for the analysis of quantitative data. Descriptive statistics such as mean, percentage and standard deviation were computed to analyse the data of the first question. Multiple analysis of variance was also used to answer the second question.

Table 2: Interpreting the Values of Arithmetic Averages

Description	Averages
very low	From 1 to 1.80
Low	From 1.80 to 2.60
Moderate	From 2.60 to 3.40
High	From 3.40 to 4.20
Very high	From 4.20 to 5.00

Result

1. Results Related to the First Question

To answer the first question: "To what extent do secondary school EFL teachers integrate 21st century skills into their classrooms?", the responses of the participants were analyzed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Scores for Each 21st Century Skills

	Mean	Std.
Sub-skills of the scale		
Collaboration Skills	3.37	.927
Using Technology as a Tool for Learning	3.36	.969
Communication Skills	3.31	.862
Creativity And Innovation Skills	3.23	1.012
Self-Direction Skills	3.01	1.11
Critical Thinking Skills	3.01	.914
Global Connections	2.95	1.006
Local Connections	2.92	1.046
Mean score of the whole scale	3.15	.922

Table 3 shows the mean score for the whole scale as well as the mean scores for each of the scale's subskills. EFL teachers practice these skills in their classrooms to a moderate degree, as indicated by the mean score of the entire scale (M=3.15). Results indicate that these skills were somewhat incorporated into teachers' teaching practices. This table indicates that "Collaboration Skills" (M=3.37) is the 21st century skill that teachers incorporate into their lessons the most. Collaboration Skills are ranked higher than Using Technology as a Tool for Learning (M=3.36). On the other hand, "global connections" (M=2.95) is the skill that teachers use the least in their classes, followed by "local connections" (M=2.92).

2. To answer the second research question, Are there statistically significant differences at the level of significance (0.05) between the means of EFL teachers' responses regarding teaching practices due to the variables; years of experience, educational qualification and training on 21st century skills?

Multiple analysis of variance was used to show the significance of the differences between the means of the participants' responses, and Table 4 shows this:

Table 4: Multiple Analysis of Variance Results According to Demographic Variables

Source	dependent variable	type i sum of squares	df	mean square	F	sig.
Years of experience	critical thinking skills	1.108	2	.554	.682	.511
	collaboration skills	1.243	2	.621	.858	.431
	communication skills	.191	2	.095	.151	.860
	creativity and innovation skills	.044	2	.022	.021	.979
	self-direction skills	.359	2	.179	.143	.868
	global connections	.665	2	.332	.322	.726
	local connections	.576	2	.288	.254	.777
	using technology as a tool for learning	.132	2	.066	.066	.936
Educational qualification	critical thinking skills	.420	1	.420	.516	.476
	collaboration skills	.141	1	.141	.195	.661
	communication skills	.596	1	.596	.946	.336
	creativity and innovation skills	.094	1	.094	.090	.765
	self-direction skills	.006	1	.006	.004	.947
	global connections	1.315	1	1.315	1.276	.265
	local connections	1.481	1	1.481	1.304	.260
	using technology as a tool for learning	.013	1	.013	.013	.909
Training on 21st century skills	critical thinking skills	2.838	1	2.838	3.493	.068
	collaboration skills	7.685	1	7.685	10.609	.002
	communication skills	7.168	1	7.168	11.373	.002
	creativity and innovation skills	3.033	1	3.033	2.903	.095
	self-direction skills	3.549	1	3.549	2.821	.100
	global connections	1.286	1	1.286	1.247	.270
	local connections	.511	1	.511	.450	.506
	using technology as a tool for learning	1.075	1	1.075	1.079	.305
Error	critical thinking skills	35.744	44	.812		
	collaboration skills	31.874	44	.724		
	communication skills	27.733	44	.630		
	creativity and innovation skills	45.958	44	1.045		

	self-direction skills	55.353	44	1.258
	global connections	45.357	44	1.031
	local connections	49.972	44	1.136
	using technology as a tool for learning	43.832	44	.996
Total	critical thinking skills	483.312	49	
	collaboration skills	596.556	49	
	communication skills	571.280	49	
	creativity and innovation skills	561.720	49	
	self-direction skills	503.844	49	
	global connections	474.750	49	
	local connections	470.742	49	
	using technology as a tool for learning	597.662	49	

According to Table 4, neither the years of experience nor the educational qualification had any statistically significant effects on the means of the participant responses at the significance level (0.05). Regarding training on 21st century skills variable, only two skills showed differences: communication and collaboration, and these differences were in favor of teachers who had received the training.

The table shows that teachers' 21st century skills teaching practices were not affected by the difference in their experience and educational qualification.

Table 5. Means, Standard Deviations – According Years of Experience

Years of Experience		CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS	COLLABORATION SKILLS	COMMUNICATION SKILLS	CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION SKILLS	SELF-DIRECTION SKILLS	GLOBAL CONNECTIONS	LOCAL CONNECTIONS	USING TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING
Less 5 year	Mean	3.15	3.35	3.31	3.18	3.12	3.12	3.09	3.35
	Std. Deviation	.798	.875	.870	1.231	1.263	1.125	1.133	1.126
10 –5	Mean	2.78	3.14	3.21	3.25	3.05	2.98	2.91	3.44
	Std. Deviation	1.064	1.042	.916	1.026	1.058	.931	.997	.993
More 10	Mean	3.07	3.52	3.36	3.25	2.92	2.83	2.83	3.31
	Std. Deviation	.890	.884	.859	.905	1.096	1.012	1.061	.897

Table 6. Means, Standard Deviations – According Educational Qualifica

Educational Qualification		CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS	COLLABORATION SKILLS	COMMUNICATION SKILLS	CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION SKILLS	SELF-DIRECTION SKILLS	GLOBAL CONNECTIONS	LOCAL CONNECTIONS	USING TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING
Bachelor and less	Mean	3.06	3.39	3.36	3.21	3.02	3.04	3.02	3.37
	Std. Deviation	.989	.999	.885	1.085	1.151	1.117	1.133	1.031
Higher studies	Mean	2.83	3.29	3.11	3.32	2.97	2.62	2.58	3.32
	Std. Deviation	.592	.624	.787	.740	1.010	.308	.579	.754

Table 7. Means, Standard Deviations – According Training on 21st Century Skills

Training on 21st century skills		CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS	COLLABORATION SKILLS	COMMUNICATION SKILLS	CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION SKILLS	SELF-DIRECTION SKILLS	GLOBAL CONNECTIONS	LOCAL CONNECTIONS	USING TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING
Yes	Mean	3.09	3.51	3.45	3.32	3.10	3.02	2.97	3.41
	Std. Deviation	.888	.838	.765	.970	1.104	1.021	1.065	.945
No	Mean	2.39	2.33	2.27	2.62	2.36	2.47	2.59	2.97
	Std. Deviation	.935	.913	.864	1.190	1.013	.806	.908	1.139

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate how EFL teachers perceive the integration of 21st-century skills in their classrooms. The findings suggested that EFL teachers have a moderate level of implementing these skills in their teaching and possess knowledge about them. Additionally, the study revealed that these skills were somewhat incorporated into teachers' teaching practices, possibly because they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in fostering their students' 21st-century skills. As McCommas (2014) rightly points out “the success of the “21st-Century Skills” movement depends on preparing teachers to effectively deliver both skills and content” (p.21). Additionally, a flexible set of 21st century skills-building functional language tasks and activities that are correlated to each unit in EFL textbooks are probably responsible for these results. This view is also supported by Amr (2020) who has found that The incorporation of these skills and competencies have been evident in designing teaching materials, like textbooks where learners are exposed to certain activities that activate these skills inductively and deductively. The results of this study are in line with those of Sulaiman & Ismail (2020) and Uka & Bedir (2023) findings. These studies illustrate that EFL teachers' 21st century skill level is at a moderate level. They also demonstrate that teachers are aware of these skills and their importance in English language learning and teaching. According to Menggo et al. (2020), English teachers should be encouraged to be able to integrate the intended 21st -century competency indicators into instructional materials that are preceded by a needs analysis stage. On the other hand, it is shown that 21st-century skills play a major role for EFL students in their EFL classes due to the universality of English language and due to the needs of the knowledge-based economy (Albahlal, 2019).

Additionally, the results showed that a high percentage of EFL teachers use technology in the classroom as a learning tool. This could be because technology has a positive effect on teaching and learning in the twenty-first century in general and language learning in particular. An additional possible explanation could be attributed to teachers' awareness of and utilization of online platforms, websites, applications, and the like, which can further enhance communication between teachers and learners. It is noticeable that technological devices have integrated heavily into EFL teacher' classes. It allows EFL teachers to prepare authentic materials for learners, use visual aids and plan interactive class activities to increase a better understanding of the material and engage more students. This is similar to the findings of study conducted by Bolat (2022), it demonstrated that the most used 21st century skill was using technology as a tool for learning. The current study result, however, differs from those of Amr (2019), which concluded that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills are the least integrated skills within the EFL textbook.

Based on the findings, there were no significant differences in the participants' responses based on their years of experience and educational qualifications. This suggests that teachers'

21st century skills teaching practices were not influenced by their level of experience or educational background. One possible explanation for this finding is that all teachers follow the same EFL curriculum, which provides equal opportunities for all students and suggests the same teaching strategies and assessments for implementing 21st century skills in classrooms. This is supported by the results of studies by Otlu (2020) and Anderson (2020), which also found that teachers' years of experience and educational level did not significantly impact their use of 21st century skills.

In regards to the results concerning training on 21st-century skills, differences were found only in collaboration skills and communication skills. These differences were in favor of teachers who received training on 21st-century skills. These findings may be due to the lack of preparation or professional training among teachers on how to implement these skills in language teaching and learning. According to Alharbi (2022) teachers' high level of knowledge in some skills of 21st century, such as critical thinking, ICT literacy, etc, may also be a result of the continuous training courses offered by the Ministry of Education which provide teachers with various training opportunities concerning teaching 21st century skills in FL classrooms. Similarly, this finding matches with Paschal & Gougou (2022) and Aristiawan & Herman (2021) conclusions. It is evident that one of the most important factors in influencing educators' perspectives on teaching and practice is offering professional development in 21st century skills.

Conclusion

It is evident that 21st century skills and English language teaching are inseparable. The results demonstrated that EFL teachers had successfully incorporated 21st-century skills into their teaching practices. Additionally, it showed how important it is for teachers to be competent in order to successfully integrate 21st century skills practices into EFL classrooms.

Based on the research findings, it is essential for educational policy makers to prioritize the professional development of teachers and provide them with training opportunities focused on the teaching of 21st century skills. Therefore, it is imperative to train teachers in these skills if we want to see them integrated into the language classroom. Teacher preparation programs should address this issue at various levels, including standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Additionally, when designing English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula, curriculum developers should take into account the findings of this study. It is necessary to conduct a content analysis of English textbooks and ensure that new editions incorporate 21st century skills for teachers. It is crucial for teachers to stay current in the rapidly evolving field of instruction.

Future research should focus on investigating EFL teachers' strategies in implementing the 21st century in language teaching and learning. Additional studies might focus more on obstacles that hinder integrating these skills in the language classroom. . Further work is required to examine the role of technology integration in developing 21st Century Skills.

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