

Acquiring the 4cs (Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking and Creativity) through Integrating the Four Language Skills in Secondary ELS Classrooms in Nigeria

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Abstract

Earlier theories of second language teaching and learning shifted from teaching discrete skills to adopting an integrated approach in order to enhance communicative competence. Our technologically driven world has redefined the in and out of school learning thus creating demands for more complex skills and competencies. Preparing students to acquire the critical skills they need to compete favourably in an era of globalization can be a challenge in Nigeria as education must go beyond the basic knowledge expectations. It is the position of this paper that our ESL teachers – even with limited materials and equipment- can assist their learners to develop the 4Cs of the 21st century skills by incorporating the new skills onto the platform of the integrated approach to language learning. This would enable our learners to respond to these new requirements with greater competence and confidence in preparation for participation in higher education and the workplace.

Key words: Communication, Collaboration, Critical thinking, Creativity, Integrated Approach

Introduction

Globalization has transformed the learning landscape of the school environment. This is because communication technology has increased the speed at which people conduct their business, trade and social interactions on a worldwide scale. A country's level of participation in the global arena now bears a direct relationship to its level of education which prepares its youth to compete favourably in

the workplace. Education is future looking, and a dynamic part of the change process of any society. Thus, enabling learners with the critical 21st century skills which are indispensable to accomplishing more complex and demanding tasks is a major investment towards development.

Indisputably, English is the language of globalization and it has become imperative to provide our ESL (English as a Second Language) learners with the necessary skills to acquire a high degree of proficiency in the language. The acquisition of critical skills (4Cs) will allow them access information and respond quickly and accurately in a variety of ways to foster working partnerships. Even though technology is at the heart of the practice of the 21st century skills, it is the position of this paper that, it is our duty as educators to steer our students towards acquiring the 4Cs - despite the fact that public secondary school classrooms operate in a low-tech environment. The paper also posits that the integrated approach - as part of communicative language teaching - can accommodate the 4Cs. The paper will focus on an explanation of the 4Cs, a review of the integrated approach, and some strategies to employ in incorporating the 4Cs into the integrated approach.

THE 4 Cs

In the last century, knowledge has become more specialized due to the changing needs of the workplace. Information and communication technology have changed how we work, learn and form our social relationships. Work relationships and partnerships stretch across global lines and knowledge and skills have had to change to meet the new demands of the times.

The four Cs of 21st century learning are four important skills which have been identified for 21st century education by a non – profit organization known as The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (NCREL& Metiri Group,2003). These 4Cs have been identified as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. These are skills that are valued in all professions and so ought to be taught in

the classroom as preparatory skills for the outside world. A brief description of these skills follows.

Communication has been taken to a much higher level because of technology. The expertise needed to share thoughts and ideas has become more complex due to the variety of media at our disposal. The information needed to communicate can be garnered in so many ways that the workplace can be shrunk to a one-man device. Similarly, technology has also made **collaboration** – working together to reach a goal easily - fast and in such diverse ways and across so many continents that new partnerships can be created and dismantled at any time. The ability to form these partnerships is now made easier through the ability to communicate. Triling and Fadel (2009) explain that today’s student must be able to articulate thoughts and ideas effectively; listen effectively to decipher more than knowledge but attitudes, values and intentions; utilize multimedia and technologies and communicate effectively in diverse environments. In addition, he must be able to work effectively with diverse teams, be helpful, flexible and assume shared responsibility.

The **critical thinking** skills manifest the ability to analyse, interpret, evaluate and synthesize existing information from a variety of perspectives and to predict likely problems that may surface (Triling & Fadel, 2009). Critical thinking in identifying, analysing and creating solutions can become extensively valuable especially when being proactive and can increase the edge of the competition. The ability to plan ahead and be proactive is a sign that critical thinking is taking place and is a necessary tool in the 21st century.

Creativity involves innovation and inventing new ways of getting things done. Both Wergetif and Dawes (2004) and Loveless (2002) see creativity as being borne from a culture of innovation derived from data, research and collaboration. An observation has been made that companies nowadays seek creative people over those who excel in leadership skills. The creative person is better skilled at solving pressing problems and can create new sources of value which can revive ailing companies (Lewis & Elaver, 2014). It is therefore

accurate to predict that those who acquire the four skills would have the advantage in the workplace.

The Integrated Approach to Language Teaching

Several years ago, language teaching moved from teaching skills discretely with a heavy emphasis on grammar to an approach which enabled learners to communicate effectively and realistically. This shift was prompted by the wave of foreign workers to Britain in the 60s who needed English for their specific purposes and needed to practise the skills to become competent users. Communicative language teaching using the Integrated Approach became the method of choice because of its immense benefits, which include its ability to: enhance the focus of real communication; brings relevance, freshness and interest to the teaching/learning environment; encourage student centered approaches (group work); enhance communication and encourage more collaboration in the planning of activities (Stceddepart, 2018)

This approach is highly valued as it ensures that both the receptive skills (speaking and listening) and the productive skills (reading and writing) are given adequate practice to represent real communication. The interactive model of integrating the skills has been found to be quite effective simply because more variety is built into the lesson through skill integration. Selma and Selen (2010) have also explained that a combination of skills has a positive effect on a student's success. Hinkel (2006) also concurred that in language classrooms skills need to be integrated and practiced in order to create more significant and learning situations. In addition, Canale and Swain (1980) findings demonstrated that practising a range of skills simultaneously, and in the context of communication allowed learners to attain a level of communicative competence more than those who did not. Other studies by Paulston (1972), Sauvignon (1972, 1983), demonstrate that CLT and its methodology have dominated the integrated approach. These are some of the aspects of the integrated approach that have motivated the need to employ the integrated approach to teach the 4Cs.

Using the Integrated Approach to Teach the 4 Cs

The 21st century teacher must possess special skills and knowledge to be prepared to meet the challenges and demands of the modern technology- driven society (Oyetunde, 2016). By its very nature the integrated approach when practiced already exhibits strong elements of communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. Using the approach allows learners to gather and process information without constraints imposed by traditional barriers (Pigdon & Worley, 1972)

Preparing the Lesson

A teacher who intends to make a success of teaching the 4 Cs must take time to understand what is at stake. Because the integrated approach already has features of the 4Cs the lesson must neither be taken for granted nor the skills be seen as an add-on. Careful planning should take the form of ensuring clear objectives and expected outcomes using strong action verbs. These objectives of the 4Cs form the higher end of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational objectives.

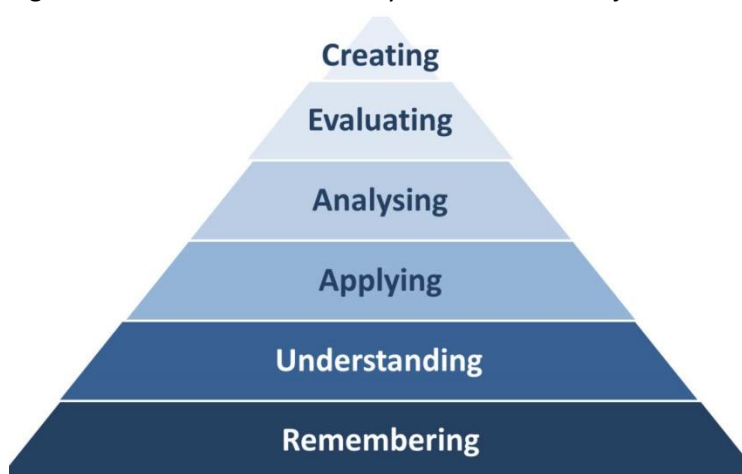


Fig 1: Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives
(Source: Internet)

Although the teacher has planned for one or two specific skills to be emphasized in the lesson, the fact is that others will be practised simultaneously. The learning scenarios will allow students to reflect

critically on a number of generative issues and to collaborate and communicate in order to discover creative solutions. Team work will strengthen the skills as students work together, respecting the diversity of the others, while sharing a vision of success. We can now take a look at some of the skills and activities needed to teach them effectively.

Communication

The skill of communication runs through the whole of the 4Cs. The language teacher knows that strengthening the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are the basic goals for effective communication which are employed on a higher level in the 21st century skills.

The modern student knows that having these skills are not enough but must be able to skillfully employ them to gain entrance to higher institution in terms of interviews, writing resumes or in the workplace where the more tasking skills of explaining, persuading, negotiating, motivating and discerning meaning, attitudes and intentions. The best way to practice these skills (and all of the other skills) is to form working groups and teams which tend to replicate the working situation. The integrated approach applies easily in the communication skill bracket because there is a large amount of tasks that incorporates the skills e.g. a reading task can be moved to a discussion/a further write up/a group writing assignment/presentation/debate. One extensive basic relevant reading task can be exploited in many ways. For example, an update on the reading or challenging views on the reading task can create a larger number of communication tasks which also involve using critical thinking and creative skills. Other tasks include discussions, text interpretation, group work and formulating responses to problems.

What raises the level of basic skills to 21st century skills, is the use of technology to gather information quickly to collaborate with a large number of people in many different situations, expressing their own views, challenging others, and having a huge amount of data to make

educated and informed decisions. Communication experiences a higher status with technology.

In general, the learning scenarios in communication will allow students to reflect critically on a number of generative issues and to collaborate in order to come up with creative solutions to the identified problems or situation. Team work strengthens the skills as students work together and respect the diversity of the other classmates while sharing a vision of success.

Wabisabi learning (2017) offers eight methods for effectively improving student communication skills:

1. Watch films that model conversation skills. The suggestion is made that at times the teacher can ask questions concerning the message, and what other observations can be made from the body language of the discussants.
2. Ensure the delivery of the message is clear. Words accurately chosen and pronounced enhance communication.
3. Reinforce active listening. Active listening means listening to understand. Building active listening skills by clarifying, repeating and summarizing are important communication skills to add to the list.
4. Offer group presentations and assignments: Team building assignments strengthen a variety of skills giving students the opportunity to work in groups and collaborate on different issues. They get to freely express their own opinions while realizing common goals.
5. Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended question are for improving discussions and eliciting information.
6. Use tasks and activities that foster critical think. Critical thinking exercises improve communication skills either verbally or written.
7. Offer effective learning opportunities. This involves recording or videotaping students' presentations in order to assist them to identify strengthens and weakness. They can also be led to critique others and receive constructive criticism.

8. Finding teachable moments. Do not miss on situations where students can be further asked for their explanation, for example, why they gave certain responses to questions. Their own reasoning may be an opportunity to see things from another perspective promoting further discussion and insights.

What the section on communication teaching as a 4C skill has proved is that even though communication was the focus, all other skills were reinforced.

Collaboration

The skill of collaboration has very wide applications because it stresses the fact that cooperation in almost all venture of productive (Handerson, 2008). However, in order to ensure that collaboration is taking place, careful planning must take place. This is because the students must have the skills so that genuine participation can take place. Henderson (2008) reminds us that students are not born with the ability to collaborate.

According to Henderson (2008), the student can play a variety of roles. He may be presenting information, solving problem or participating in a group evaluation. The onus is on the student themselves who are responsible to guide one another to use the light language etc. Other skills needed are the ability to utilize and synthesize information, respond positively or negatively or politely (Robbins, Weisemburg-Synder, Damons, Van Rosyen & Ismail, 2011).

Good collaboration skills can be taught. They involve listening skills, speaking skills, learning confidence, problem solving and other communication skills. It is a fact that collaboration cannot happen without effective communication. All kinds of group work enable collaboration to take place.

Critical Thinking

This particular skill has always been crucial to the success of students long before the advent of the 21st century skills. Halvoisten (2018)

explains that to think critically means to analyse a problem from many viewpoints objectively. It is a process involving a careful analysis of an issue before reaching a conclusion and a solution. He also notes that many language teachers who are used to the integrated approach are already developing the skill.

Developing critical thinking skills is necessary for students as the lead to the development of other skills like higher level concentration, deeper analytical abilities and improved thought processing (Mendez, 2016). It is linked to another skill of the 4Cs in the sense that imagination involved in critical thinking is creative.

One of the best ways to support critical thinking is through collaboration where group work is emphasized. Creating a pool of creative thinkers is a good preparation for the workforce of tomorrow. Paul and Elder (2008) offer some strategies for improving the critical thinking of learner. These include: students teaching students; group problem solving; letting students assess their listening and holding them responsible. More specific tasks involve:

Analyzing thinking – Having students follow the logic of an article or text to which they are asked to identify, they can state the author’s purpose, question, information, conclusion, concepts, implication, assumption implications and point of view.

Evaluation thinking – This can be offshoot of the assignment above where the students can evaluate critically the author’s purpose, concepts, line of reasoning, point of view and implications for taking such a position (Paul & Elder, 2008). Getting to the deeper level of analysis stimulates critical thinking skills, and writing in groups ensures ideas can be further shared and challenged.

There are other assignments that can be given to students for example, writing on a research topic or even floating a potential problem to which they must find solutions and carefully explain why they chose one solution over another.

Creativity

The fact that creativity is mentioned last in the list of the 4Cs does not diminish its importance. Rather, creativity embraces the other skills of communication, critical thinking and collaboration. Henderson (2008) observes that creativity, ingenuity and innovation are keys to success in the evolving skills a global economy. Creativity according to Mendez (2016) is the ability to elaborate, refine, analyse and improve on original ideas. These statements make creativity an imperative for the teacher to cultivate the skill in his students. Halvorsen (2018) recognizes that in the classroom, teachers have to be flexible and recognise that students have different learning styles and must accommodate them within a variety of choices. Time must be given to students to think about and solve problems in creating ways. Using the integrated approach will accommodate the aspect of creativity. For example, students can be presented with a story as a reading exercise and asked to compose a different ending. This can be an individual or group assignment. In another way, the class can be exposed to films and some aspects of writing in an attempt to expand their own thought and create new ones. Posing problems from live experiences as well and discussion, for expected solution, can lead to creative outcomes.

Robert Epstein an internationally known creativity expert has identified four major competencies of creativity:

1. Capturing – preserving new ideas
2. Challenging – giving ourselves tough problem to solve
3. Bordering – boosting creativity by learning new things
4. Surrounding – associating with interesting and diverse things and people (Henderson, 2008).

Epstein sees capturing as the most important and suggests that teachers should encourage their students to keep daily logs of their ideas that can later be exploited for creativity.

Implications for the Curriculum

Despite the emphasis on technological applications, the 21st century skills are not about technology but learning. It is recognition of the

shift from teachers teaching to students doing. Thus, within the new learning environment the classroom dynamics must change.

Curriculum planners and designers must take these new challenges and turn them into rewarding outcomes. Real change comes with changes in content and in instructional practices because the skills that our student will acquire model authentic work in the 21st century. These changes must be felt along the continuum of the teaching and learning curve as they must be included in teacher training and retraining schedules and reflected in textbooks and other instructional materials.

Conclusion

This article looked at the 4Cs for 21st century skills in some detail as a bid to highlight the fact that despite the low technology available in public secondary schools, it is still possible to work with our ESL students using the integrated approach that incorporates language skills. Noting that the 4Cs are interconnected should give the teacher a measure of confidence that in teaching a particular skill, others are being silently reinforced. This article also points out that the new demands of the workspace should be seen by curriculum planners and designers to incorporate the 4Cs and the integrated approach into reviewed textbooks and instructional materials. Above all, it is also a reminder that the 4Cs are not about teaching technology but students creating and constructing their own interactions with technology.

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